

The postpartisan partisan: Obama as Christian realist

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Prior to his election in 2008, Barack Obama declared that Reinhold Niebuhr was one of his favorite philosophers. This affirmation led several prognosticators to elucidate various features of the early Obama presidency in Niebuhrian terms. Indeed, his mode of governance betrays a marked Niebuhrian slant and sometimes—as in his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize—a Niebuhrian vocabulary. That is to say, the president seeks to recognize and embrace both the idealistic and realistic poles of Christian action. He understands Christian realism as Niebuhr defined it—a recognition that politics is inherently tragic.

Obama's foreign policy has been a portrait of Niebuhrian realism. Idealists on both sides have attacked him—the right for not being willing to act unilaterally in the

quest to reshape the world, the left for not relinquishing the use of coercive military force. In the case of the uprising in Libya, for example, Obama waited for a coalition to form before directing American forces to command and coordinate the efforts of NATO forces. In preparing for intervention, Obama went beyond the calls for air strikes and a no-fly zone, while insisting on a limited American involvement. Having made that decision, Obama went on national television and argued that intervention was the right thing to do, and he gave three reasons: failure to act would leave a stain on America's conscience; America had an interest in the outcome in Libya, since American leadership in the region would be adversely affected by a refusal to act and by a resultant humanitarian crisis; and the costs of action were acceptably low.

In this mixture of arguments one can see the calculations of a pragmatist balanced by the hopes and desires of the idealist. The Christian realist takes the opportunity at hand to accomplish a proximate good.

Obama's domestic policies are also infused with the spirit of Christian realism. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—the \$860 billion stimulus package—included tax cuts (more than one-third of the stimulus took the form of payroll and small business tax cuts), short-term economic stimulus (including extended unemployment benefits, food assistance and supplemental funding for job training) and longer-term programs to reconstruct and reorient the fundamentals of the economy (including infrastructure projects and investments in infant industry in the environmental sector).

When he unveiled his program, Obama explicitly placed it in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. But the stimulus is a textbook example of liberal pragmatism during an economic downturn. To the degree that Obama favors an active government role in the economy (and understanding that such a preference is exaggerated by the particular economic conditions of the last four years), he does so in a limited way.

In August 2011, however, it appeared that Obama's pragmatic brand of politics would not be electorally popular. His approval rating hovered at about 40 percent. Of course, the slow and halting economic recovery played a significant role in that low number. But it appeared too that his modest brand of progressivism was both alienating his opponents and failing to excite his natural base of supporters, who wanted him to be more assertive and less open to compromise.

Obama's world looked very different when he awoke this past November 7, reelected to a second term. In his victory speech on election night, Obama again took up the hope for getting beyond partisan divisions, which he articulated in 2008, but this time he did so in the context of an obviously partisan struggle. "When we go through tough times," Obama said, "when we make big decisions as a country, it necessarily stirs up passions, stirs up controversy." And he added, "That won't change after tonight." In 2008 Obama had offered hope that politics might be remade. Since then he has learned that politics obeys its own laws.

Niebuhr told us that political life is unavoidably partisan. Those children of light who dream of a harmony of interests and of the end of partisanship—who hope for a postpartisan politics—either hide from themselves their own aims (the triumph of their own partisan belief) or misunderstand the essence of social life and the distribution of powers. The postpartisan dream is an idealistic illusion. Niebuhr teaches us that concern for justice requires engagement with political life. Thus we are called to engage in partisan politics. But Niebuhr also teaches that any partisan position is bound to contain only part of the full account of justice. Thus partisanship must be overcome. Obama's new challenge is to acknowledge the reality and even the value of partisan politics without succumbing to the hubris of partisanship, all while articulating his long-held hope for a more perfect union that manages partisanship in a more constructive way.

This balancing act will involve the president in a constant set of pragmatic calculations. He must insist on his own conception of the good while weighing proximate goods against ultimate goals. There are signs of such insistence in his resolve to raise taxes on higher income brackets and in the way his administration is mobilizing supporters to generate continued political support for his agenda. Whether he will maintain such assertiveness is one of the most important questions of Obama's second term. The answer will show us how Obama is applying the insights of Niebuhr's Christian realism.