

Between Hope and Reality: An Open Letter to Barack Obama

by Ralph Nader via reed - ICH *Tuesday, Nov 4 2008, 7:44am*

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Dear Senator Obama:

In your nearly two-year presidential campaign, the words "hope and change," "change and hope" have been your trademark declarations. Yet there is an asymmetry between those objectives and your political character that succumbs to contrary centers of power that want not "hope and change" but the continuation of the power-entrenched status quo.

Far more than Senator McCain, you have received enormous, unprecedented contributions from corporate interests, Wall Street interests and, most interestingly, big corporate law firm attorneys. Never before has a Democratic nominee for President achieved this supremacy over his Republican counterpart. Why, apart from your unconditional vote for the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout, are these large corporate interests investing so much in Senator Obama? Could it be that in your state Senate record, your U.S. Senate record and your presidential campaign record (favoring nuclear power, coal plants, offshore oil drilling, corporate subsidies including the 1872 Mining Act and avoiding any comprehensive program to crack down on the corporate crime wave and the bloated, wasteful military budget, for example) you have shown that you are their man?

To advance change and hope, the presidential persona requires character, courage, integrity-- not expediency, accommodation and short-range opportunism. Take, for example, your transformation from an articulate defender of Palestinian rights in Chicago before your run for the U.S. Senate to an acolyte, a dittoman for the hard-line AIPAC lobby, which bolsters the militaristic oppression, occupation, blockage, colonization and land-water seizures over the years of the Palestinian peoples and their shrunk territories in the West Bank and Gaza. Eric Alterman summarized numerous polls in a December 2007 issue of *The Nation* magazine showing that AIPAC policies are opposed by a majority of Jewish-Americans.

You know quite well that only when the U.S. Government supports the Israeli and Palestinian peace movements, that years ago worked out a detailed two-state solution (which is supported by a majority of Israelis and Palestinians), will there be a chance for a peaceful resolution of this 60-year plus conflict. Yet you align yourself with the hard-liners, so much so that in your infamous, demeaning speech to the AIPAC convention right after you gained the nomination of the Democratic Party, you supported an "undivided Jerusalem," and opposed negotiations with Hamas-- the elected government in Gaza. Once again, you ignored the will of the Israeli people who, in a March 1, 2008 poll by the respected newspaper *Haaretz*, showed that 64% of Israelis favored "direct negotiations with Hamas." Siding with the AIPAC hard-liners is what one of the many leading Palestinians advocating dialogue and peace with the Israeli people was describing when he wrote "Anti-semitism today is the persecution of Palestinian society by the Israeli state."

During your visit to Israel this summer, you scheduled a mere 45 minutes of your time for Palestinians with no news conference, and no visit to Palestinian refugee camps that would have focused the media on the brutalization of the Palestinians. Your trip supported the illegal, cruel blockade of Gaza in defiance of international law and the United Nations charter. You focused on

southern Israeli casualties which during the past year have totaled one civilian casualty to every 400 Palestinian casualties on the Gaza side. Instead of a statesmanship that decried all violence and its replacement with acceptance of the Arab League's 2002 proposal to permit a viable Palestinian state within the 1967 borders in return for full economic and diplomatic relations between Arab countries and Israel, you played the role of a cheap politician, leaving the area and Palestinians with the feeling of much shock and little awe.

David Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator, described your trip succinctly: "There was almost a willful display of indifference to the fact that there are two narratives here. This could serve him well as a candidate, but not as a President."

Palestinian American commentator, Ali Abunimah, noted that Obama did not utter a single criticism of Israel, "of its relentless settlement and wall construction, of the closures that make life unlivable for millions of Palestinians. ...Even the Bush administration recently criticized Israeli's use of cluster bombs against Lebanese civilians [see www.atfl.org for elaboration]. But Obama defended Israeli's assault on Lebanon as an exercise of its 'legitimate right to defend itself.'"

In numerous columns Gideon Levy, writing in Haaretz, strongly criticized the Israeli government's assault on civilians in Gaza, including attacks on "the heart of a crowded refugee camp... with horrible bloodshed" in early 2008.

Israeli writer and peace advocate-- Uri Avnery-- described Obama's appearance before AIPAC as one that "broke all records for obsequiousness and fawning, adding that Obama "is prepared to sacrifice the most basic American interests. After all, the US has a vital interest in achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace that will allow it to find ways to the hearts of the Arab masses from Iraq to Morocco. Obama has harmed his image in the Muslim world and mortgaged his future-- if and when he is elected president.," he said, adding, "Of one thing I am certain: Obama's declarations at the AIPAC conference are very, very bad for peace. And what is bad for peace is bad for Israel, bad for the world and bad for the Palestinian people."

A further illustration of your deficiency of character is the way you turned your back on the Muslim-Americans in this country. You refused to send surrogates to speak to voters at their events. Having visited numerous churches and synagogues, you refused to visit a single Mosque in America. Even George W. Bush visited the Grand Mosque in Washington D.C. after 9/11 to express proper sentiments of tolerance before a frightened major religious group of innocents.

Although the New York Times published a major article on June 24, 2008 titled "Muslim Voters Detect a Snub from Obama" (by Andrea Elliott), citing examples of your aversion to these Americans who come from all walks of life, who serve in the armed forces and who work to live the American dream. Three days earlier the International Herald Tribune published an article by Roger Cohen titled "Why Obama Should Visit a Mosque." None of these comments and reports change your political bigotry against Muslim-Americans-- even though your father was a Muslim from Kenya.

Perhaps nothing illustrated your utter lack of political courage or even the mildest version of this trait than your surrendering to demands of the hard-liners to prohibit former president Jimmy Carter from speaking at the Democratic National Convention. This is a tradition for former presidents and one accorded in prime time to Bill Clinton this year.

Here was a President who negotiated peace between Israel and Egypt, but his recent book pressing the dominant Israeli superpower to avoid Apartheid of the Palestinians and make peace was all that it took to sideline him. Instead of an important address to the nation by Jimmy Carter on this critical

international problem, he was relegated to a stroll across the stage to "tumultuous applause," following a showing of a film about the Carter Center's post-Katrina work. Shame on you, Barack Obama!

But then your shameful behavior has extended to many other areas of American life. (See the factual analysis by my running mate, Matt Gonzalez, on www.votenader.org). You have turned your back on the 100-million poor Americans composed of poor whites, African-Americans, and Latinos. You always mention helping the "middle class" but you omit, repeatedly, mention of the "poor" in America.

Should you be elected President, it must be more than an unprecedented upward career move following a brilliantly unprincipled campaign that spoke "change" yet demonstrated actual obeisance to the concentration power of the "corporate supremacists." It must be about shifting the power from the few to the many. It must be a White House presided over by a black man who does not turn his back on the downtrodden here and abroad but challenges the forces of greed, dictatorial control of labor, consumers and taxpayers, and the militarization of foreign policy. It must be a White House that is transforming of American politics-- opening it up to the public funding of elections (through voluntary approaches)-- and allowing smaller candidates to have a chance to be heard on debates and in the fullness of their now restricted civil liberties. Call it a competitive democracy.

Your presidential campaign again and again has demonstrated cowardly stands. "Hope" some say springs eternal." But not when "reality" consumes it daily.

Sincerely,
Ralph Nader

November 3, 2008

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