

‘Secret Muslims,’ Open Bigotry:

Islamophobia in the 2008 presidential campaign

In the 1990 Polish elections a whispering campaign suggesting Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Roman Catholic, was a "secret Jew" attracted widespread attention in the U.S. press, as did a nearly identical rumor about the leading challenger in Poland's 1995 election. In no uncertain terms, U.S. news reports called the rumors "ugly examples" (**Washington Post**, 12/31/90) of the "increasingly visible expressions of anti-Semitism" (**New York Times**, 1/21/91), the most notable such "anti-Semitic acts" in Poland (**Washington Post**, 7/8/95).

U.S. media rejoiced that such religious intolerance did not characterize Americans, as an **Atlanta Journal Constitution** op-ed explained (5/23/91):

For all the current debate over diversity in American culture, it's important to recognize how thoroughly imbued we are with this classically liberal view of citizenship. We do not divide ourselves into "true ethnic Americans" and those of other "nations." People of all races, religions and national origins are, we believe, fully entitled to the name American.

Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen (11/16/90) explained the persistence of the false rumor that the Polish candidate was secretly a Jew as an expression of "Poland's peculiar cultural virus," remarking, "What are facts when contrasted with prejudice?" Cohen described such an affair as a measure of "a country's moral temperature, of gauging its character and its ability to deal rationally with its problems instead of setting off down the road, club in hand, in the search for scapegoats."

It seems Poland's "cultural virus" is not *that* peculiar. Despite the self-congratulatory words, the American campaign of 2008, like Poland in 1990, has seen Democratic candidate Barack Obama targeted by a relentless campaign suggesting he is a member of a religious minority--not a secret Jew, but a secret Muslim.

Beyond a whisper campaign, the targeting of Obama is happening in the open--in online magazines (**Insight**, 1/17/07; **Human Events**, 3/20/07; **FrontPageMag.com**, 1/7/08), on right-wing talk radio shows (**Rush Limbaugh**, 1/19/08; **Savage Nation**, 9/8/08), even in hardcover (Jerome Corsi's *Obama Nation*, published by CBS's Simon & Schuster in 2008). Those calling Obama a Muslim clearly see the term as a pejorative and have a sense that the "charge" will resonate with their audiences and with a significant slice of the American electorate.

So far, it seems as though they may be on to something. A Pew Research Center poll (6/18=29/08; reported 7/15/08) found that twelve percent of both Democrats and Republicans reported having the erroneous belief, while 10 percent of all voters profess to not knowing his religion because they've "heard different things" about it. Fifty-two percent of respondents who knew Obama was a Christian intended to vote for him, versus 37 percent of those who mistakenly believed he was Muslim.

But with few exceptions, media have not reacted nearly as forcefully to the bigotry behind the rumor campaign on their own turf as they did when the tactic was tried in Poland. Instead, journalists often accepted the idea that there was something suspicious or bad about being Muslim by referring to the canard as a "smear" (**New York Times**, 1/17/08; **ABC News**, 12/5/07), an "unsubstantiated charge" (**Washington Post**, 6/28/08), or an example of "nasty and false attacks" (**New York Times**, 1/17/08).

For **NPR's** Alison Stewart (**Bryant Park Project**, 1/29/08), the rumor that Obama had attended an Islamic school as a child in Indonesia "sounded like a page out of the Lyndon Johnson smear of Barry Goldwater in 1964." Stewart was referring to Johnson's 1964 TV campaign ad suggesting that President Goldwater would launch a nuclear war. In other words, according to Stewart's analogy, the suggestion that you attended an Islamic school is tantamount to the claim that you are likely to blow up the planet.

While the **Post's** Cohen devoted two entire columns to Obama's "pastor problem"--first (1/15/08) asking where Obama's "sense of outrage" was over his pastor Jeremiah Wright's "praise for an anti-Semitic demagogue" (Louis Farrakhan), and then, after Obama denounced Farrakhan's comments, asking (3/18/08) why it took so long--he has given the anti-Muslim rumor campaign against Obama a mere two sentences (4/22/08, 7/1/08).

In this context, it's not surprising that the number of Muslims running for political office in the U.S. is declining from its already small number, according to the American Muslim Alliance (**Chicago Tribune**, 6/30/06). In 2000, some 700 Muslims (out of a population of more than 2 million—Pew, 5/22/07) ran for office in the U.S.--a figure that plummeted 90 percent to just 70 in 2002, and had only crept up to 100 by 2004.

With the Islamophobic premise behind the rumor campaign is going largely unquestioned, Muslims have been repeatedly shunned in the 2008 race. One glaring example was at a campaign event in Detroit where Obama staff took two women wearing hijabs, traditional head scarves, out of the view of TV cameras--a clear message, as one of the women put it (**Politico**, 6/18/08), that "they do not want him associated with Muslims or Muslim supporters." (The Obama campaign later apologized for relocating the women.)

Later that month, the Obama campaign started a website called "Fight the Smears" to, "among other things, debunk portrayals of Obama as a Muslim" (**International Herald Tribune**, 6/30/08). Just a month later, a website (**Muslim Brotherhood Watch**, 7/31/08, 8/1/08) alleged that Obama's Muslim Outreach Coordinator Mazen Asbahi's past involvement with the Ann Arbor Muslim Students Association, and his serving on the board of an Islamic trust--a role he had held for a few weeks eight years earlier--constituted ties to the U.S. Muslim Brotherhood. Shortly after this online "exposé," the **Wall Street Journal** (8/6/08) pointed out that an imam who was a past member of the Islamic trust board had been charged in a State Department investigation of alleged racketeering and fundraising for Hamas, a case that ended in a mistrial. Asbahi had resigned from the board after hearing of the charges against his fellow board member, yet this tenuous association was enough to prompt Asbahi to resign from the Obama campaign in anticipation of the distraction the media coverage would create.

Much has been made in the media about the unknown origins of some of the anti-Muslim rumors about Obama. The **Washington Post** (6/28/08), for instance, published a lengthy investigation of these email rumors under the headline "An Attack That Came Out of the Ether," and CNN's Joe Johns (**CNN Newsroom**, 7/15/08) has described the rumors that Obama is a Muslim as originating from "the dark side of the Internet."

Islamophobia in the current election cycle may have started in "the ether," but the record shows it has run into too little resistance from media and political elites, who have done too little to reject it, and in some cases served to advance it.