

**OBAMA'S STRENGTHS:
SUPERB INTELLECT, OPENNESS, AND PRAGMATISM**

“Eggheads of the world unite. You have nothing to lose except your yolks”

--Adlai Stevenson

I was so busy consulting blogs and national newspapers on the internet before the election that I did not have time to read Barack Obama's two books. It is rare that an American president has written a best selling memoir--*Dreams from My Father*--and a best selling policy statement--*The Audacity of Hope*--before taking office.

Both of Obama's parents earned PhDs, and Obama has a law degree from Harvard. Conservative Michael McConnell, a federal appellate judge appointed by George W. Bush, was so impressed by the way Obama edited one of his articles for the *Harvard Law Review* that he recommended Obama for a job at the University Chicago Law School.

For twelve years Obama taught constitutional law at a school known for its conservative professors, such as current Supreme Court Judge Antonin Scalia. Obama was offered a tenured position there, but he turned it down in order to devote himself to public service.

The Academy lost the services of a brilliant mind, but the nation and the world now have the benefit of an intelligent and bold leader.

The Audacity of Hope reads as one of his students described his classes. He has an in-depth grasp of the issues and he is not an ideologue, offering criticisms of both liberal and conservative viewpoints. Mary Ellen Callahan, now a Washington, D. C. attorney, remembered instructor Obama as "offending my liberal instincts."

The American people should feel secure in the fact that their president knows more about the Constitution than any of his predecessors, and they should be reminded that Vice-President Biden also taught constitutional law. The lawless Bush administration will now be seen as an aberration in American history.

In a 2004 column for the *Wall Street Journal*, Peggy Noonan, conservative pundit and former Reagan speechwriter, praised Bush as “the triumph of the seemingly average American man. He is not an intellectual. Intellectuals start all the trouble in the world.” Noonan obviously “misunderestimated” the trouble that this clueless, average man could bring to the U.S. and to the world.

Noonan’s indictment of intellectuals is baseless. An English philosopher named John Locke gave us the idea of three branches of government and the principle of religious tolerance. Early American intellectuals such as Roger Williams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln read Locke and other thinkers of the European Enlightenment and founded the most successful liberal democracy in world history.

Locke’s essay on religious tolerance falls short because he argues that non-believers should be shunned because they cannot be trusted. By including atheists in his inaugural address, a first as far as I know, Obama joins Roger Williams in assuming, even as the Apostle Paul does in Romans 2:15, that all humans can know and follow the moral law.

One of the best insights in *The Audacity of Hope* is Obama’s contention that some of today’s conservatives are so rigid that they have become absolutists. He states that “there is an absolutism of the free market, an ideology of no taxes, no regulation, no safety net—indeed, no government beyond what’s required to protect private property and provide for the national defense.”

Absolutists can be found on the left as well as the right. Edmund Burke was correct that, in their zeal to wipe the slate clean, the French revolutionaries would

destroy themselves. The Marxist-Leninists followed their own absolutes in Russia and China without regard to the consequences and left a record of misery and devastation. The radical free marketeers who now say that there should have been even less regulation are just as blind as Communist purists, who still believe that their governments should have controlled human behavior even more.

Pro-life absolutism has been very destructive of our social fabric of civility and respect. Doctors who offer legal abortions are targeted and sometimes shot, and vulnerable women have been harassed at family planning clinics. Anti-abortion restrictions on U.S. family planning aid has had disastrous effects on the reproductive health of women around the world.

Abstinence programs that don't work keep American teen pregnancy rates the highest in the world, forcing mothers bear children that they are incapable of raising and straining our health and welfare systems.

A perfect example of this pro-life absolutism is found in a recent letter in *USA Today* (1/12/09). The writer states that "data showing an increase in teen birthrates in 26 states is indeed troubling, but the solution certainly isn't to promote the intrinsic evils of contraception and abortion." He concludes that "we must what is right," presumably regardless of the consequences.

The facts are clear and compelling. Countries that offer comprehensive sex education, contraceptives, and abortion have much lower teen pregnancy and abortion rates, lower by as much as factor of ten in European welfare states.

President Bush failed to take sufficient notice of terrorist warnings while at his Texas ranch, but he and other allegedly "compassionate conservatives" rushed back to Washington to undermine the right of Terri Schiavo's husband to determine the destiny of his own wife. An autopsy proved what doctors had claimed all along: Terri Schiavo had been brain dead for years.

There are absolutists in the area of health care, those who are willing to put up with worst health care in the industrialized world rather than accept any government health programs, including Medicare, which has far lower administrative costs than private insurance.

Obama finds it odd that some conservatives, whose leaders had always argued for the importance of law and order, would now support a president that acted contrary to the Constitution, international laws, and the Geneva Conventions, which U.S. has always supported. While he was in the Senate, Obama slowly realized that the Bush and his congressional allies believed that “the rules of governing no longer applied,” and that “habeas corpus and separation of powers were niceties that only got in the way.”

While absolutes will and should operate in the realm of faith, Obama argues that the very nature of our government not only guards against absolute power, but also against the promotion of “absolute truth, the infallibility of any idea of ideology or theology or ‘ism,’ any tyrannical consistency that might lock future generations into a single, unalterable course.”

Obama maintains that our founders “were suspicious of abstractions and liked asking questions.” Obama quotes Madison’s democratic principle that all opinions are “open to the force of argument” in a public sphere of give and take.

Obama sees American pragmatism embodied in Abraham Lincoln, the founder of the Republican Party. Lincoln saw the importance of government action where private initiative had failed or was inappropriate. Lincoln signed bills giving public lands to settlers and railroads, and then promoted the Morrill Act so that these people would have access to the practical knowledge of our land-grant universities and send their children there for minimal fees.

Alan Brinkley sums up Obama’s promise very well: “The American people would do well, in the aftermath of this disastrous presidency, to consider the value

of what may be an uninspiring, but certainly essential, quality of leadership: the ability to experiment, to make changes, to reconsider ideas and principles that fail to work, and to embrace the philosophy of pragmatism that is one of the few truly American contributions to the history of ideas.”

I disagree with Brinkley only in the choice of the word “uninspiring.” Obama has shown that he can and will be an inspiring pragmatist. Furthermore, let us hope that Obama is correct that this “pragmatic, non-ideological attitude” will continue to be the view of “the majority of Americans.”

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