



01/24/2008

Depends On What the Meaning of the Word 'Change' Is

By: YOAV SIVAN

Will the real Barack Obama please stand up?

Perhaps he's the Profile in Courage who spoke at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta last week.

"If we're honest with ourselves," he told the crowd - some of whom might never have heard the word "gay" in church without derision - "we'll acknowledge that our own community has not always been true to King's vision of a beloved community. We have scorned our gay brothers and sisters instead of embracing them."

Or perhaps Senator Obama is the triangulating politician - mindful of Republicans and independents who can vote in open-enrollment Democratic primaries and caucuses - who expressed admiration for Ronald Reagan before a Nevada newspaper editorial board last week.

"I think Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not," Obama told the Reno Gazette. "Reagan put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it. He just tapped into what people were already feeling, which was, 'We want clarity, we want optimism.'"

Ah yes, Ronald Reagan and the good old days. The man who guided America to a decade of deadly silence on HIV and AIDS and caused the death of tens of thousands of Americans. Should we in the LGBT community have some other kind of clarity?

Senator Obama's campaign has tried to convince us not to read too much into the candidate's treacly tribute to Reagan. They say Obama praised Reagan only as a president who changed America.

The problem is, that interpretation requires us to parse Obama's words in the same way we parsed Bill Clinton's words when Clinton declared, "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is." Certainly Obama wouldn't want us to split semantic hairs like that. He's the candidate of the new politics.

Perhaps Obama is so new to politics, he needs a reminder of the crimes Ronald Reagan perpetrated upon those with HIV and AIDS.

Though evidence of an epidemic had been piling up since the start of the Reagan administration in 1981, it was not until 1987 that the president first referred to the epidemic publicly. In the initial years, when the LGBT community had undergone a formative shock whose political and social repercussions still echo today, all it got from the Reagan White House was homophobia, underfunded research, and archaic sex education.

The Reagan White House viewed AIDS as a punishment for gays. Its director of communications, Patrick Buchanan, once argued in print that AIDS was nature's revenge on gay men.

Or as Reagan himself once asked the nation, "When it comes to preventing AIDS, don't medicine and morality teach the same lessons?"

On second thought, Obama is correct in referring to Reagan as the president who "changed the trajectory of America." By the end of Reagan's eight years in office, 60,000

Americans had HIV or AIDS and 30,000 people had died from AIDS-related illness.

So let's have clarity indeed. Senator Obama last week shunned the memory of those who died at the hands of Ronald Reagan's ignorance. Obama perpetuated the fraud that Ronald Reagan was a benign Hollywood retiree who broke bread with colleagues from the profession, including Rock Hudson.

Obama calls upon America to return to an era of optimism. Fair enough. But when it comes to the question of Barack Obama's being ready to be president of the United States, I'm no longer so optimistic.

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