

Obama's spark may be embracing his Muslim heritage

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I was, and remain, a supporter of Republican Senator John McCain's presidential bid. During the difficult days of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, McCain was a reliable advocate of human rights as the guiding agenda for policy in Iraq. This commitment has not subsided. The picture of that great beacon of freedom in Asia, Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, hangs at the center of McCain's Senate office. He is also someone who has sought to reform how money is used in the American political process. Unfortunately for McCain, his polls and his campaign finances have been especially poor in recent weeks. John McCain seems to have lost his presidential spark.

In reality, he probably lost it almost eight years ago - to be specific in January-February 2000. I knew McCain from our joint work on Iraq throughout the 1990s, in particular the launch of the International Committee for a Free Iraq, in which we both participated. Back in the early summer of 1999, when his star began rising against George W. Bush, it was clear the moment would soon come in the campaign when everyone who was inclined to embrace McCain's spark would ask where the flame was. Needed were well-thought, innovative policies. Instead, McCain showed that he had little to offer that could kindle the imagination.

Which brings me to Barack Obama - or "Mubarak" Obama. He is a breath of fresh air in the Democratic campaign when compared to his rivals, notably Clinton. The problem is, however, how is it possible to beat the Clintons' political machine other than by fundraising - which is important, but never decisive. What is decisive for people like McCain and Obama is the spark, or more importantly how to transform the spark into a flame.

Obama needs a different type of spark than McCain. Last year Obama published a book titled "The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream." Unfortunately, it is quite a turgid tome, and not particularly inspiring when it comes to explaining his political positions. I propose a different type of rekindling.

This is where "Mubarak" comes in. Mubarak is the original Arabic name of what became, in Kenyan Islam, from which Obama hails, "Barack." Obama described this in his remarkable first book, "Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance," which he published just after graduating from Harvard Law School.

The account, which Obama took a year off to complete, is a treasure chest of sparks. It is the elegantly written, extensive story of a difficult childhood after Obama's parents separated. His American mother was white. His father was a Kenyan who, were it not for the dictatorship of Daniel arap Moi, seemed poised to lead his country. Obama recounts the days of his private schooling in Hawaii, a black teenager haunted both by the color of his skin and the absence of a father who remained a mythical figure for him. He then dwells on his formidable work in Chicago's poorest black neighborhood, and his

rediscovery of Kenya and his family.

Any country would be lucky to have as president someone with Obama's sensitivity and his sort of reflective leadership. Here is my unsolicited advice to him for keeping the spark alive: Remember that you're called Barack Obama; that your father was a Muslim. Do not turn your back on this heritage; instead use it as the spark that might push your campaign ahead. In this growing world war between Islam and the West, you should be proud of your Muslim legacy. Make it a central plank of your campaign to become world leader. There is no contradiction between this and the Christian convictions you have, but you also need to flaunt the Islamic tradition as part of your character and worldview so as to become a uniquely ecumenical president in a world increasingly in the throes of religious strife. That aspect of your deeper richness has been deliberately muted by your team in favor of a solely Christian profile. This is wrong.

What the world needs from the United States is for it to show that its democratic system is mature enough to produce a president who is both black and Muslim. In a day and age when the most important fault-line is that between Islam and the West, a president who is a Muslim, and who is as proud of this as he is proud of being black and Christian, can only evoke true leadership. Barack Obama should embrace that Muslim spark.

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