

Invoking a Presidential Revelatory Moment

Barack Obama's choice of the Rev. Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at Tuesday's inauguration has drawn complaints about Mr. Warren's outspoken

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opposition to same-sex marriage, but that ruckus shouldn't obscure the fact that this best-selling pastor of an Orange County, Calif., megachurch provided one of the most revelatory moments in the presidential campaign.

It occurred on Aug. 16 when Mr. Warren roped both parties' nominees into a "civil forum" at his Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif. — the closest they had come, at that point, to a genuine debate. In back-to-back interviews, Mr. Warren asked the candidates the same questions.

By most accounts, it was a winning day for Senator John McCain. Mr. Obama, in the view of his supporters, was careful and thoughtful; in the view of his critics, vague and unsure. (The transcript shows him using the phrase "you know" enough times to console Caroline Kennedy.)

Everyone, on the other hand, agreed that Mr. McCain was direct, crisp and clear-cut — to the point that conspiracy theorists in the Obama camp were convinced that Mr. McCain, who was interviewed second, had not really been kept out of earshot of the questions, as Mr. Warren had announced.

The questions covered the waterfront, although with conservative evangelicals heavily represented in the Saddleback audience — another McCain advantage — there was a tilt toward is-

suues like abortion, same-sex marriage and financing religion-based community services. The candidates' answers to such policy questions, although hardly free of campaign boilerplate, were the ones most widely reported.

Mr. Warren did, however, throw in one question going far beyond any specific policy. "Does evil exist?" he asked each candidate, and if so, "Should we ignore it, negotiate with it, contain it or defeat it?"

One really has to quote the transcript extensively to get the full flavor of the two replies:

"Evil does exist," Mr. Obama began. "I mean, I think we see evil all the time. We see evil in Darfur. We see evil, sadly, on the streets of our cities. We see evil in parents who viciously abuse their children. And I think it has to be confronted. It has to be confronted squarely."

"And one of the things that I strongly believe is that, you know, we are not going to, as individuals, be able to erase evil from the world. That is God's task. But we can be soldiers in that process, and we can confront it when we see it."

"Now, the one thing that I think is very important is for us to have some humility in how we approach the issue of confronting evil because, you know, a lot of evil has been perpetrated based on the claim that we were trying to confront evil."

And when Mr. Warren interjected, "In the name of good," Mr. Obama agreed, saying, "Just because we think our intentions are good doesn't always mean that we're going to be doing good."

Similarly asked about whether to ignore, negotiate with, contain or defeat evil, Mr. McCain gave a reply that was as warmly greeted as it was unhesitating:

"Defeat it. (Applause.) A couple of points. One, if I'm president of the United States, my friends, if I have to follow him to the gates of hell, I will get Osama bin Laden and bring him to justice. (Applause.) I will do that, and I know how to do it. I will get that guy. (Applause.)"

"Of course, evil must be defeated. My friends, we are facing the

A minister who provided looks into two contenders.

transcendent challenge of the 21st century — radical Islamic extremism."

He spoke of "two young women who were mentally disabled" being used as suicide bombers. "If that isn't evil, you have to tell me what is." (Applause.)

The central battleground, Mr. McCain said, was "Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and Iraq."

"And we are winning and we are succeeding," he continued, "and our troops will come home with honor and with victory, and not in defeat. And that's what's happening." (Applause.)

"We can face this challenge," he concluded, "and we must totally defeat it. And we're in a long struggle. But when I'm around

the young men and women who are serving us in uniform, I have no doubt. None." (Applause.)

Mr. Obama located evil overseas but also on American streets and even in American homes. It had to be "confronted squarely," he said, but with humility because "a lot of evil has been perpetrated based on the claim that we were trying to confront evil."

By contrast, Mr. McCain immediately took the question of evil as referring to Al Qaeda, Iraq and a long struggle against "radical Islamic extremism." He emphasized giving no quarter and achieving total victory.

The two candidates made only fleeting but telling religious references.

Mr. Obama warned that erasing evil from the world was "God's task," a process in which humans could at best be "soldiers." Mr. McCain invoked not God but "the gates of hell," to which he was sworn to pursue Osama bin Laden.

Mr. McCain's remarks found admirers last August (William Kristol among Times columnists, for one). Certainly his approach to evil has deep roots in American culture. Had it not been burdened by association with a host of increasingly questioned administration policies, it might well have carried the day. The transcript records no applause interrupting Mr. Obama's emphasis on humility, ambiguity and the evil within as well as without.

The discussion of evil at the Saddleback forum gave Americans a valuable glimpse into the president-elect's soul — and quite possibly into their own.