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## McCain, Obama, and America's Two Exodus Stories

by James W. Skillen

There are deeper currents carrying the presidential campaign toward Election Day. We aren't necessarily conscious of them when we listen to the debates, the stump speeches, and the results of daily tracking polls, but they are there in a big way.

The deepest current, I believe, is the grand narrative about America's exceptional origin, identity, and destiny. Yet, this story comes in two different versions, which actually conflict with one another, helping to explain some of the cultural as well as political antagonisms that lie beneath the surface of ordinary partisanship. Consider America's contrasting Exodus stories.

The first Exodus story is the one familiar to most Americans—those with ancestral roots in Europe and particularly Great Britain, but including all who now take the story for granted. Courageous Puritans, in covenant with God, took their exodus from oppression in Britain (Egypt), crossed the Red Sea of the Atlantic, and entered a new Promised Land where they built a City on a Hill to serve as a light to the nations. Freedom for this new Israel was at odds with monarchy and eventually insisted on constitutional protections against any future Pharaoh as well as security against all potential foreign adversaries who might try to snuff out the flame of liberty—America's light to the nations. A strong central government would be anathema just as a king would be unthinkable. The chief executive for the nation's minimal federal government (only grudgingly established) should be little more than an executive director, responsible to carry out the decisions of Congress, which the Founders tethered carefully to the states. The Constitution granted the federal government responsibility only to regulate interstate commerce and to defend the states from foreign attacks. The states were to be genuine polities—political communities—with a full range of powers, except for defense. The federal government was to be a servant of the states, not the head of a national polity.

America's second Exodus story was authored by its slaves—mostly in song. For them the original promise of America, in the providence of God, was that all humans are created equal. The Pharaoh who thwarted the fulfillment of that promise was the slaveholders and the Constitution that supported them. The exodus of these slaves from oppression had to take place within the Egypt of America itself in order to open the way to the liberation of the nation—the Declaration's promised land of freedom and equality. And that exodus was made

possible with the help of a strong federal government, which overthrew slavery and, eventually, after a hundred more years of oppression, established equal civil rights for everyone in the *national* polity. This story builds on ancient appeals to the “rights of Englishmen.” And as it gathered momentum it drew together other quests for rights and equality, such as voting rights for non-Christians, for those who owned no property, and for women.

### **Exodus stories today**

John McCain mostly represents, or is carried along by, the current of the first American Exodus story. He is an icon of the Puritan errand into the wilderness that continued until the western expanse of America’s promised land had been settled. He epitomizes the defense of American freedom by those willing to give up their lives in warfare. He promises to stand tall against real and perceived enemies by maintaining America’s military strength because of his love for the nation. And he will continue the Reagan-Bush quest for a smaller federal government, lower taxes, and, when needed, deficit spending for the sake of national security and market freedom. McCain can more easily be pictured exercising the presidential role of head of state—symbol of the nation—than the role of head of government—the day-to-day manager, executive, and policy negotiator with Congress.

Barack Obama mostly represents, or is carried along by, the current of the second American Exodus story. The great American promise, realized through the exodus from slavery and the civil rights movement, is equal civil rights for all. Freedom begins at home and is won and maintained by the federal and state governments, with as strong a federal government as needed. Government should not be seen as suspect but must be directed to its proper end of realizing equal opportunity for all in a strong national community. Justice and prosperity will be achieved for everyone not by means of trickle-down economics and government’s waiting on the market to deliver public goods. Instead of deficit spending with insufficient taxation (which led, during the last eight years, to a doubling of the national debt, greatly burdening our grandchildren), government ought to balance its taxes and spending. Moreover, American freedom among the nations of the world depends on upholding principles of the rule of law and the building of sound international institutions. Obama can more easily be pictured exercising the presidential role of head of government while also symbolizing the Declaration’s promise of equality in the role of head of state.

McCain gives voice to the love of freedom—both individual and national—that he holds in tension with a suspicion of government. Obama gives voice to the love of American ideals that are realized in part through government actions. For McCain and many of his followers, the military is attached to the American nation rather than to an overgrown federal government that should be cut down in size. For Obama, the military is one department of a government that should give as much attention to diplomacy as to military preparedness in order to play a constructive role in the world.

Some supporters of McCain who are carried along by the first American Exodus story wonder if Obama is truly and fully American. His life story doesn’t seem to fit their preferred mold. Some Obama supporters fear the impact of racism in the election, an attitude that still lingers in those who cannot yet accept that America is now a multiracial, multicultural national polity.

### **Moving beyond the Exodus stories**

The first American Exodus story runs off the tracks when the exaggerated myth of American exceptionalism leads the president and Congress to take actions that neither enhance U.S. security nor gain respect for it abroad. Moreover, when it pits love of the nation against government, the latter is weakened to the point where it can no longer act deliberately, decisively, and with forethought but is reduced to merely reacting to emergencies, such as the current financial crisis. When free-market advocates like President Bush, Treasury Secretary Paulson, and Federal Reserve Chairman Bernanke reach for immense federal power to save the financial system, they contradict their basic philosophy. That, in turn, leads to further suspicion of government by citizens on one side who think government should leave free markets alone and by citizens on the other side who see no comparable action being taken to save the national polity with its crumbling infrastructure, growing trade deficit, expanding distance between rich and poor, and troubling crises in health care, Social Security, and the environment.

The second American Exodus story runs off the tracks when popular appeals to the federal government and the courts turn politics and litigation into little more than competition among more and more identity groups for the “right” to receive benefits or privileges that are supposed to overcome their exclusion or oppression. The cry of slaves for freedom and the long struggle for civil rights by African Americans were responses to the wholesale exclusion of an entire group of citizens from almost every aspect of American life simply because they were black and had been purchased for slavery, not for equal participation in the first American exodus story. But the subsequent misuse of civil-rights appeals by every manner of “group” to try to gain benefits and privileges that extend far beyond the scope of civil-rights claims makes governing increasingly difficult, fueling identity politics and interest-group brokering that frustrate the building of a national polity that achieves the common good.

In preparing to vote on November 4, we need to think carefully about which presidential candidate appears most able to rise above the conflicts between, and the deficiencies of, the two American Exodus stories. Who is best prepared to seek out the ways of wise statecraft for a national polity that is troubled on many fronts at home while confused, overextended, and unbalanced in its foreign and defense policies? Who is best able to move beyond paeans to America’s greatness and lead Congress in the hard work of building a sustainable and trustworthy republic that can, with modesty and forethought, conduct the hard work of multidimensional diplomacy in a shrinking, warming, warring world?

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