



***TIME's* Religious Democratic Crusader**

By Brian Fitzpatrick

Rarely does a journalist provide the public with a detailed look at her own values and agenda. In her book *The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats Are Closing the God Gap* (Scribner, 2008), *TIME* magazine editor Amy Sullivan has laid bare her political soul for all to see. Sullivan has given Americans an opportunity to examine whether personal biases can skew “objective” news reporting.

Sullivan is not just another obscure journalist. She heads up presidential campaign coverage for the nation’s leading newsweekly. In his article [Our Campaign Staff](#), *TIME* Managing Editor Richard Stengel writes:

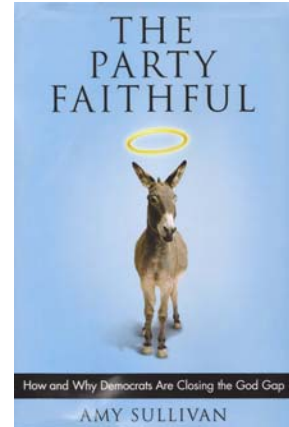
To cover what is the most wide-open election in our lifetime, we have assembled the premier political team in journalism, a group that combines decades of campaign experience with the agility required to keep readers informed across a range of platforms. ...Overseeing our coverage is Nation editor Amy Sullivan...

Who is this person who has risen to the highest levels of American journalism? Sullivan describes herself as a liberal Democrat and an evangelical Christian. A former staffer for several Democratic congressmen, including the hyperpartisan former leader of Senate Democrats, South Dakota Sen. Tom Daschle, Sullivan is pro-choice and supports the homosexual political agenda.

Raised by parents who were politically liberal Democrats and theologically conservative Baptists, Sullivan writes “I was raised to honor God, my parents, and the Kennedys—and not necessarily in that order.” (*The Party Faithful* [TPF], p. 5.) Sullivan moved away from her Baptist roots to earn a

degree from theologically liberal Harvard Divinity School. She has written about the crossroads between religion and politics for numerous publications.

Sullivan levels a number of sweeping, unsubstantiated accusations at Republicans and conservative Christian leaders, and expresses particular anger at people who suggest religious believers should naturally support conservative Republicans.



- Republicans never missed an opportunity to paint Democrats as secular heathens who would ban the Bible if given half a chance. (TPF, p. 9.)
- Mainstream journalists were captivated by this fascinating movement led by bombastic preachers with bad haircuts and funny accents who had a knack for quips and controversy. (TPF, p. 45.)
- And a general coarsening of popular culture—another unanticipated consequence of relaxed social norms—meant that those children were exposed to higher levels of profanity, sex, and violence on television and in movies. Conservatives jumped at the chance to blame these trends on liberals, and were particularly eager to lay every negative social indicator at the feet of the women’s movement. (TFP, p. 87.)
- A Baptist pastor’s declaration that it wasn’t possible to be a good Christian and support the Democrats “knocked the wind out of me.” (TPF, p. 2.)
- I don’t much like being told that my faith is called into question because of my political views. (TPF, p. 6.)

Timely, informative, and immensely thought-provoking, *The Party Faithful* is a tough and revealing analysis of the Democratic Party’s relationship to religion and an essential primer for evaluating the outcome of the 2008 presidential election.



Photo of Amy Sullivan from the dust jacket of *The Party Faithful*.

Sullivan wrote TPF to disprove two commonly held assumptions about religion and politics. First, “the arrogant assumption of conservatives that they had a patent on piety,” and second, “that Democrats seemed to buy into this conventional wisdom as well, believing that religious Americans were all conservative.” (TPF, p. 4.) Sullivan’s goal is to encourage Democrats to build an electoral majority by reaching out to traditional Catholic and evangelical voters, but—and this is the central

point—without retreating from permissive Democratic stands on social issues like homosexuality and abortion. Sullivan is not trying to persuade the Party to follow God, but to persuade followers of God to vote for the Party.

Inducing religious believers to vote for a party that rejects their fundamental moral values concerning sexuality, and often views them with hostility and disdain, as Sullivan acknowledges, is a very tall order. Sullivan’s solution is simple: Packaging, packaging, packaging.

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Sullivan’s first lesson about packaging is that it has to be done right. Sullivan notes the failed late ’70s attempt by “progressive evangelical” Ron Sider to bring Bible-believing evangelicals into the liberal camp. Sider’s politically liberal evangelicals ran into an impasse with the theologically liberal National Council of Churches, established stakeholders in the Democratic coalition. Sider told Sullivan, “We wanted to garb the progressive social agenda in orthodox biblical language, and they weren’t interested in that.” (TPF, p.16.)

Eventually somebody came along who did get it right. The master of spin, former President Bill Clinton, emerges as a hero for Sullivan. Regarding abortion, she writes, “Clinton ... thought he had discovered a way to talk about Middle American values without abandoning Democratic core principles.” She discusses at length the development of Clinton’s successful slogan for sounding as if he opposes abortion without actually opposing it: “safe, legal and rare.” Writes Sullivan, “This created an opening for Catholics and evangelicals who supported Democratic policies on the economy or education or health care, but who weren’t comfortable with a party they saw as aggressively pro-choice.” (TPF, p. 93.)

Sullivan also celebrates Clinton’s appropriation of a conservative catchphrase, “family values,” which he hitched to the liberal economic agenda.

- “I want an America that does more than talk about family values,” declared Clinton. “I want an America that values families” by supporting family-leave legislation, creating jobs, and establishing a living wage. (TPF, p. 93.)

Sullivan pronounces Clinton “a genuine Southern evangelical” and “A big Labrador of a politician,” and extols his “deep familiarity with the Bible” (TPF, p. 90).

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The subtitle for chapter 4 is “Bill Clinton’s Faithful Presidency.” Sullivan doesn’t appear to be joking. One wonders whether Bill Clinton sends a thrill up Sullivan’s leg, as Barack Obama does to MSNBC’s Chris Matthews.

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Another Sullivan heroine is Mara Vanderslice, John Kerry’s onetime religious outreach director, who won over many undecided Catholic voters in Michigan in 2004. Vanderslice changed the campaign phone bank script about abortion, emphasizing Kerry’s interest in lowering abortion rates. She recruited Catholic nuns to pound the pavement for Kerry “in their sturdy shoes.” And she framed Kerry’s leftist economic agenda as an effort to “improve the ‘common good,’ a resonant phrase from Catholic social teaching.” (TPF, p. 184.) Vanderslice’s fiddling with the rhetoric helped Kerry win a majority of Catholic votes in Michigan, “enough to put him over the top there.”

In *The Party Faithful*, Sullivan rejoices when Democrats win the support of religious voters through duplicitous spin. That’s understandable, though deplorable, for a partisan Democratic activist. Sullivan, however, is no longer a Capitol Hill party hack; she’s a very influential journalist. Do her personal values, beliefs and political loyalties compromise her professional objectivity? Will she expose the efforts of both Democrats and Republicans to gull the public? Or will she support Democratic efforts to win the support of religious voters, by reinforcing the Party’s message that Democrat candidates are people of faith receptive to religious values?

Sullivan’s *TIME* Articles

It’s impossible to determine definitively how Sullivan’s editing has affected *TIME*’s overall coverage of the presidential campaign, but Sullivan’s bylined articles offer insight into her influence on the coverage.

July 12, 2007. The Origins of the God Gap

Sullivan adopts a defensive, pro-Democratic tone and asserts that the party’s leading candidates are “faith-friendly.”

- George W. Bush was able to get away with arguing that his White House would protect religious organizations that had been “discriminated against” by the antireligion Clinton Administration.

- Today, Democrats find themselves in an unusual situation, with a surfeit of faith-friendly front runners.

July 12, 2007. TIME Poll: Faith of the Candidates

Sullivan describes the Democratic candidates as more comfortable talking about faith than the Republicans.

- The hoary joke that a "religious Democrat" is more of an oxymoron than "jumbo shrimp" couldn't be more wrong in this election cycle, in which it's the Democrats who are talking comfortably about faith while their Republican counterparts dodge the subject.

October 11, 2007. Campaign Briefing

Sullivan chides "conservative bloggers" and promotes the faith credentials of both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

- **SWIFTBOATING ATTACK:** Not even 12-year-olds are off-limits. After seventh-grader Graeme Frost gave his Sept. 29 Democratic radio address in support of the contentious State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) bill, conservative bloggers went after him and his family, claiming the Frosts send Graeme and his sister to fancy private schools, own a lavish house and are too wealthy to receive state health coverage.
- **Obama's Altar Call:** Barack Obama is in the midst of a "40 Days of Faith and Family" campaign in South Carolina after completing a "faith tour" of Iowa. Obama spent a recent Sunday at a Greenville mega church telling the story of how "I accepted Jesus Christ in my life."
- [Burns Strider is director of faith-based operations for Hillary Clinton], a former Southern Baptist missionary who calls everyone brother or sister and can tell you exactly when he decided to "give my heart to Jesus." His latest mission: spreading the good news about Clinton to religious audiences. ... The lifelong Methodist and former Sunday-school teacher faces the challenge of convincing Americans her faith is genuine. That's in part why she's given Strider a senior role, unusual for a Democratic campaign.

October 22, 2007. Huckabee's Bid for the Christian Right

In an article about the Values Voters Summit held October 20, 2007, Sullivan fails to praise former Baptist preacher Mike Huckabee's genuine faith. Instead, she marginalizes him by casting him as a fundamentalist preacher.

- But it was former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee who lit up the crowd with a fiery sermon ... in the hands of Huckabee, a Baptist preacher, the David reference became a rallying cry that resonated with social conservatives ... He settled in behind the lectern as if it were a pulpit ... Huckabee started off with more fire and brimstone than he has displayed thus far in the campaign, hitting all the red-meat conservative issues: Islamo-fascism (ignoring the threat "will get us killed"), immigration ("we need to build a fence") and abortion ("a Holocaust").

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November 21, 2007. Is Obama's Iowa Surge for Real?

Sullivan reports uncritically an example of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's appealing but meaningless rhetoric – “the fierce urgency of now” – and then lets him get away with a real whopper:

- [A woman in the audience] interrupts to disagree, and that gets Obama going. "Iraq did not launch 9/11," he says, growing more and more animated. "That is part of the misinformation that has been coming out of this Administration."

December 6, 2007. Romney's Risky Faith Gambit

Sullivan sharply criticizes Republican candidate Mitt Romney's speech addressing his controversial Mormon faith:

- And the candidate left no buzzword untouched, name-checking nativities in public squares, strict constructionist judges, and the phrase "Under God." All are much ballyhooed causes of religious conservatives, especially during the December season when charges of a "War on Christmas" fill cable airwaves....

- Still, Romney did little to put to rest persistent questions about what exactly he believes.

It's instructive to contrast Sullivan's treatment of Romney's speech to her laudatory treatment of Barack Obama's Philadelphia speech in her March 20, 2008 article (below).

January 2, 2008. Wednesday Night Church

The night before the Iowa caucuses, Sullivan notes a troubling sneak attack on religious people seeking to participate in the political process:

- A few churches have reported receiving anonymous letters warning that if their leaders get involved in electoral politics, they could end up in jail.

Rather than express outrage at this dirty trick, Sullivan speculates whether it will be effective.

- But even if that's enough to convince pastors to remain mum, the evangelical congregants ... [still] had the evening to chat with their undecided peers in between spaghetti suppers and hymn sings.

January 7, 2008. The Eight Keys to New Hampshire, A Primary Primer

Sullivan identifies "Global Warming" as one of the keys and takes the opportunity to slap Republicans:

- That could result in some raised temperatures for Republicans who are still getting used to the idea that global warming might be real.

Sullivan also unmask's Mitt Romney's political re-packaging, the practice she encourages in Democrats.

- For months in Iowa, Mitt Romney tried to establish himself as a conservative's conservative — on national defense, hot-button social issues, and economics. Iowa didn't buy it, especially in the face of the Huckabee insurgency. So Romney has shifted back to his more natural role of the corporate candidate who wants to turnaround Washington, wading deep into policy during debates and showing up at town hall meetings with a to-do list. It's a more natural fit that allows him to run on real managerial expertise, not the conservative record he never had in the first place. But will New Hampshire buy his turnaround?

February 14, 2008. The Dems Finally Get Religion

Sullivan builds up Obama's and Clinton's spiritual credentials once more.

- Backstage at the Target Center in Minneapolis before a rally earlier this month, Barack Obama engaged in one of his pregame rituals: the presidential candidate joined a circle of young campaign supporters and staff, clasped hands with those on either side of him and prayed.
- Hillary Clinton, his rival for the Democratic nomination, has talked on the campaign trail about the "prayer warriors" who support her, and her campaign has made sure that primary voters know that Clinton used to host church picnics at the governor's mansion in Arkansas.

March 20, 2008. The Origin of Obama's Pastor Problem. Coauthored by James Carney.

Sullivan and Carney heap praise on Obama's speech addressing the Rev. Jeremiah Wright controversy, and put the best possible spin on his participation in Wright's church.

- The speech he delivered at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia was an artfully reasoned treatise on race and rancor in America, the most memorable speech delivered by any candidate in this campaign and one that has earned Obama comparisons to Lincoln, Kennedy and King. But that doesn't mean it will succeed in its more prosaic mission of appealing to voters who have their doubts about Obama and his preacher. It left unanswered a crucial question: What attracted Obama to Wright in the first place?
- Much of white America is unfamiliar with the milieu of the black church. When clips from Wright's sermons began circulating, many whites heard divisive, angry, unpatriotic pronouncements on race, class and country. Many blacks, on the other hand, heard something more familiar: righteous anger about oppression and deliberate hyperbole in laying blame, which are common in sermons delivered in black churches every Sunday.

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Sullivan and Carney suggest a possible explanation as to why Obama was attracted to Wright (the pastor's emphasis on conflict between blacks and whites), offer a flattering explanation of why he remained in Wright's church, and finish by humanizing the candidate.

- He didn't explain why he stayed, but by trying to show black and white resentment as the backdrop for Wright's comments, Obama suggested that his response to controversy isn't to walk out of the room but to try to understand what's fueling the fire.
- After he delivered his speech, Obama found his wife Michelle backstage. She was weeping. He shared a quiet, emotional moment with her.

April 23, 2008. A Primary with No End

After Hillary Clinton won the Pennsylvania primary, Sullivan turned from faith questions to warn Democrats about the rocky shoals ahead, a service she does not provide to Republicans.

- After six weeks of an increasingly negative contest, Clinton's solid, 10-point victory almost guarantees that the Democratic race will continue into June. The once-gleeful pundits now find themselves turning their rental cars toward Indiana while Republicans marvel at their luck and Democrats try to game out a resolution that doesn't involve a convention-floor battle in Denver.
- ...Tuesday night's results may require Clinton to alter her case against Obama in ways that could do real damage if he becomes the nominee. ... she'll have to instead argue that he should not be President. And that's music to Republican ears.

May 7, 2008. Clinton's Faltering Case for Staying In

Sullivan stands up for the interests of the Democratic Party and its likely nominee, Barack Obama, by delivering a no-holds-barred attack on Hillary Clinton following the North Carolina and Indiana primaries.

- Can you imagine Hillary Clinton actually giving up her quest for the presidency?
- It's hard to admit defeat when you are constantly trying to change the rules of the game.

- No matter how hard she and her steadfast backers try, the exit polling from Indiana and North Carolina are not going to help make the case for her going on.
- Perhaps the most disturbing indicator for Clinton was the fact that 15% of those who voted for her on Tuesday said they would not back her in November
- What Obama advisers hope is that their candidate will soon have the opportunity to introduce himself to voters on his own terms, free from attacks within his own party and the magnifying glasses of the press corps. ... For that to happen, however, Hillary Clinton will have to step out of the race.

Conclusion

In her news reporting, Amy Sullivan consistently employs a critical tone toward Republicans and a generous and supportive tone toward Democrats, reflecting her partisan background. She praises the spirituality of Democratic candidates and derides the spirituality of Republican candidates, reflecting the agenda stated in her book of bringing religious voters into the Democratic fold. She takes often gratuitous slaps at Republican candidates, circles the wagons around Democrats in trouble, and defends the interests of the Democratic Party above all.

Would Amy Sullivan, head of *TIME* magazine's presidential campaign coverage, let you know if a Democratic politician is trying to pull the wool over your eyes? Don't count on it. She's more likely to investigate whether the ploy is working. Readers should take *TIME*'s reporting on this year's presidential race with a grain of salt.

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