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John McCain's latest attempt to link Barack Obama to extremism

WITH THE presidential campaign clock ticking down, Sen. John McCain has suddenly discovered a new boogeyman to link to Sen. Barack Obama: a sometimes controversial but widely respected Middle East scholar named Rashid Khalidi. In the past couple of days, Mr. McCain and his running mate, Gov. Sarah Palin, have likened Mr. Khalidi, the director of a Middle East institute at Columbia University, to neo-Nazis; called him "a PLO spokesman"; and suggested that the Los Angeles Times is hiding something sinister by refusing to release a videotape of a 2003 dinner in honor of Mr. Khalidi at which Mr. Obama spoke. Mr. McCain even threw former Weatherman Bill Ayers into the mix, suggesting that the tape might reveal that Mr. Ayers -- a terrorist-turned-professor who also has been an Obama acquaintance -- was at the dinner.

For the record, Mr. Khalidi is an American born in New York who graduated from [Yale](#) a couple of years after [George W. Bush](#). For much of his long academic career, he taught at the [University of Chicago](#), where he and his wife became friends with [Barack](#) and [Michelle Obama](#). In the early 1990s, he worked as an adviser to the Palestinian delegation at peace talks in Madrid and Washington sponsored by the first Bush administration. We don't agree with a lot of what Mr. Khalidi has had to say about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the years, and Mr. Obama has made clear that he doesn't, either. But to compare the professor to neo-Nazis -- or even to Mr. Ayers -- is a vile smear.

Perhaps unsurprising for a member of academia, Mr. Khalidi holds complex views. In an article published this year in the Nation magazine, he scathingly denounced Israeli practices in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and U.S. Middle East policy but also condemned Palestinians for failing to embrace a nonviolent strategy. He said that the two-state solution favored by the Bush administration (and Mr. Obama) was "deeply flawed" but conceded there were also "flaws in the alternatives." Listening to Mr. Khalidi can be challenging -- as Mr. Obama put it in the dinner toast recorded on the 2003 tape and reported by the Times in a detailed account of the event last April, he "offers constant reminders to me of my own blind spots and my own biases."

It's fair to question why Mr. Obama felt as comfortable as he apparently did during his Chicago days in the company of men whose views diverge sharply from what the presidential candidate espouses. Our sense is that Mr. Obama is a man of considerable intellectual curiosity who can hear out a smart, if militant, advocate for the Palestinians without compromising his own position. To suggest, as [Mr. McCain](#) has, that there is something reprehensible about associating with Mr. Khalidi is itself condemnable -- especially during a campaign in which Arab ancestry has been the subject of insults. To further argue that the Times, which obtained the tape from a source in exchange for a promise not to publicly release it, is trying to hide something is simply ludicrous, as Mr. McCain surely knows.

Which reminds us: We did ask Mr. Khalidi whether he wanted to respond to the campaign charges against him. He answered, via e-mail, that "I will stick to my policy of letting this idiot wind blow over." That's good advice for anyone still listening to the McCain campaign's increasingly reckless ad hominem attacks. Sadly, that wind is likely to keep blowing for four more days.

Smearing Rashid Khalidi

By VIJAY PRASHAD

Idiot wind, blowing every time you move your mouth,
Blowing down the backroads, headin' south

-- Bob Dylan, "Idiot Wind." (1974).

Sarah Palin has done it again. On the advice of the McCain-Palin team, she's trying to tie Obama to another professor, this time to Columbia University's Rashid Khalidi. Here she is at Bowling Green University, "It seems that there is yet another radical professor from the neighborhood who spent a lot of time with Barack Obama going back several years. This is important because his associate, Rashid Khalidi, he in addition to being a political ally of Barack Obama, he's a former spokesperson for the Palestinian Liberation Organization."

The Bill Ayers move didn't really work. He's the first professor that Palin refers to. The neighborhood is Hyde Park, which surrounds the University of Chicago, where Khalidi and Barack Obama used to work, where Ayers lives, and where Michelle Obama works (she's currently on leave from the University of Chicago hospital). Few

bought the Ayers story. It was far-fetched. It's true that Ayers was a Weatherman (one of its cofounders in 1969). Also true that he went underground not long after ("we lived like hippies," he later said). It is also the case that the FBI dropped its case against him, but pursued his partner, Bernardine Dohrn. They surrendered in 1980, and when a judge lectured her about social change and tactics, Dohrn held fast, telling him that they had "differing views on America." So it goes.

Obama was born in 1961. He was only eight when the Weathermen formed. And he was in Indonesia. There he got his own lessons in power from his step-father Lolo, "Better to be strong. If you can't be strong, be clever and make peace with someone who's strong. But always better to be strong yourself. Always." Lolo is one of the richest characters in Obama's *Dreams from my father*, and it is through Lolo's reticence that we come to learn how the 1965 mass genocide of Indonesian communists affected Obama (which he calls "one of the more brutal and swift campaigns of suppression in modern times," and then lyrically bemoans the amnesia, how the events can disappear "the same way the rich and loamy earth could soak up the rivers of blood that had once coursed through the streets"). Lolo sleeps with a gun under his pillow. But Lolo is no terrorist.

Nor was Ayers. Ayers' political development would come as part of the history that paralyzed people like Lolo, and silenced the other millions in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It was for them, and the state of paralysis in the Democratic Party, as well as the lack of confidence in the New Left, that Ayers and others decided to do something bolder, something more dangerous. In *Prairie Fire* (1974), Ayers and his comrades straddled the divide that has been within Marxist theory since its origin: the problem of reform and revolution. "Engage the enemy" to move toward power, said the document, but this seemed almost wishful thinking. The more inspired passage is for those elements of reform, and then for this to move, qualitatively, toward something more: act "to encourage the people, to provoke leaps of confidence and consciousness, to stir the imagination, to popularize power, to agitate, to organize, to join in every possible way the people's day to day struggles." These are the "community organizers" that Palin denounced. If they are able to move out of the everyday and trigger a new horizon, they are dangerous indeed. More so than if they engaged the enemy with guns.

But none of the McCain-Palin baiting worked. It might have if the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago, had taken the bait. This is where Ayers' teaches. If they did to him what the University of Colorado had done to Ward Churchill, then the McCain-Palin ticket might have had a cause célèbre to sneer at as it unfolded on the streets that surround Jane Addams' Hull House. But it is to the credit of the University officials that they didn't enter the fray.

Obama's always been comfortable with the radical fringe. When at Occidental (1982-1983), Barack threw himself into the anti-apartheid movement. "To avoid being mistaken for a sellout," he writes freely, "I chose my friends carefully. The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-roc performance poets. We smoked cigarettes and wore leather jackets. At night, in the dorms, we discussed neocolonialism, Franz Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy." All this sounds familiar to me, an undergrad like him at the other end of Los Angeles.

No surprise then that Obama would be comfortable around Bill Ayers and Rashid Khalidi, both radicals in their different ways. Khalidi is one of the best-regarded

scholars of the Middle East teaching in the United States. Until recently, Khalidi taught at the University of Chicago. When I was in graduate school during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Khalidi played a significant role as the interpreter of events in the Middle East. These were complex times, with nationalism exhausted and imperialism emboldened, as well as with insurgent Islamism on the horizon. Khalidi's soberness was a tonic. During the first Gulf War, he was essential. He also brought Edward Said to the campus, whose lecture in an overcrowded lecture hall guided us toward an adequate anti-imperialist position, between the heinousness of the Ba'ath and the awful consistency of imperialism. When Edward Said died in 2003, Columbia University honored his decades of distinguished service with the Edward Said Chair of Arab Studies. The first recipient of that chair was Rashid Khalidi, who is a member of the History Department and of the Middle East Institute (a part of the School of International and Public Affairs, whose other faculty include such dangerous characters as David Dinkins, Jeffery Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz). Khalidi is a consistent critic of U. S. policy in the Middle East (*Resurrecting Empire*, 2004) and of Israeli politics vis-à-vis the Palestinians (*The Iron Cage*, 2006). He's an inter-faith kind of guy; not someone with the temperament to touch a document like *Prairie Fire* with his pen.

Palin's staff seem to be sloppy readers. Obama, we are told, did toast Khalidi at his going-away party in 2003. So far so good. Having seen the name Khalidi and Edward Said in the same sentence, the Palin team assumed they were the same person. But, it was Said, and not Khalidi, who played an active organizational role in the Palestinian struggle. Between 1977 and 1991, Said was a member of the Palestinian National Council, but not of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (the slippage is made all too often). The PNC was a general, all-party council of a people in the middle of a struggle, not like the PLO, which was an umbrella of various political parties headed by al-Fatah (whose leader in those years was Yasser Arafat, later a recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace). Said broke with the PNC in 1991, just about when he was in Chicago for his talk. He would point out that the PLO, which had usurped the reins of the Palestinian struggle, lost ground during the Oslo discussions because of which it "lacked credibility and moral authority" (his voluminous writings that detail this break are collected in *The Politics of Dispossession*, 1994, *Peace and Its Discontents*, 1996, and *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, 2000). Said also received his diagnosis about leukemia in 1991. It was a fateful year.

Khalidi, whose name Palin could not pronounce, was born in New York. He is an intellectual with a moral commitment to peace and justice in the Middle East. His main organizational commitments don't include the PLO, which, in the period of Khalidi's ascent into the higher altitudes of the academy, was already in impervious decline. Nothing the *New Yorker* could say or do would help the festering Palestinian Authority, and neither would Khalidi give his voice to being the puppet of al-Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas or Farouk Kaddoumi (if anything, the politics of Khalidi might line up with those of Marwan Barghouti of al-Mustaqbal, but Khalidi's intellectualism might not be the disposition for the jailed leader).

Smart Khalidi. He decided to keep mum while Palin rattles. And he had the good sense to quote Dylan. "I am not speaking to the media at this time, and certainly not until this idiot wind passes." Or really, you'll never know the hurt I suffered nor the Palin I rise above....We're idiots babe. It's a wonder we can even feed ourselves.

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