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The Power of Pictures

LSE Ideas

By Nick Kitchen

By now everyone has seen it, right? The Obamas in the Oval Office, Barack in a djellabah and turban and his wife Michelle as a gun-toting Black-Panther. An approving Osama Bin Laden looks down on the couple's fist bump as an American flag burns in the fireplace. The New Yorker's cartoon has provoked outrage on the left and the right, with both presidential candidates condemning the depiction.

Of course, it is just a cartoon. But there is an argument to say that the New Yorker, in opting for such an close-to-the-bone lampooning of the misgivings many Americans have about Barack Obama's candidacy, has actually done him something of a favour.

Last week a Newsweek Poll revealed the following false beliefs Americans hold about Obama. Twelve percent of voters think he was sworn in as senator on the Qur'an. 26 percent believe he was raised as a Muslim and 39 percent believe he attended an Islamic school as a child growing up in Indonesia. Prior to Newsweek's poll, the Pew Center found at the end of June that 12% of voters believe Obama to be a Muslim.

The Republicans would have been expected to encourage these false beliefs, engendering mistrust of the opposition candidate. Yet the New Yorker's cover renders such tactics far more difficult. By putting the issue of Obama's religion into such contrast, and drawing condemnation from the McCain camp, it now becomes almost impossible for the Republicans to question Obama's suitability for office on the basis of his religious outlook. The merest hint that Obama's background renders him unsuitable for high office forces its advocate into a defense of that New Yorker cover, and in no way can that benefit McCain. Thus the effect of the extremity of the New Yorker's take may be to render the entire issue of Obama's religion off limits, even when the campaign – inevitably – descends into personal slurs and dirty tricks.

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