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Obama's Speech

Michael Sean Winters | May. 24, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The President gave what was billed as an important speech about terrorism and U.S. efforts to confront it yesterday. In the event, the speech was less important than the hype. The President attempted to give a clear justification for his policies and to point a way forward in the struggle against terrorism, but there was not really much new.

News coverage tended to open not with the speech but with the interruption. A protester shouted questions at the President, and it took security a few minutes to remove her from the room. The intrusion gave President Obama what his text lacked, a moment to shine. He was not flustered and he even acknowledged that it was his obligation, and that of other political leaders, to consider the things she was saying, which came easy to him: She was objecting to Guantanamo Bay and so was he. ?These are tough issues and the suggestion that we can gloss over them is wrong,? he said, although no one, so far as I know, suggests glossing over them so much as other people reach different conclusions from the President. The President again proposed closing the facility and while everything he said made sense, there was nothing he said that was likely to change the minds of those who resist any alternative to keeping some suspected terrorists detained at Guantanamo indefinitely. I would not bet a lot of money on it, but I am guessing there will still be inmates at Guantanamo when the President leaves office in January 2017.

The President addressed the issue of drone strikes and this was the strongest part of the speech. He revealed a great deal about his thinking, about the way his mind works, starting with the suggestion that such strikes were effective, secondly that they were legal, and finally that they were moral. I wish he had delved more deeply into the issue of efficacy. Yes, other methods of attacking a known terrorist have down sides, very large ones as the President pointed out. But, there is something about the disproportionate modernity of a drone and the usually primitive countrysides into which they are sent that rankles. Two soldiers, face-to-face, irrespective of the cause that led them to the quarrel, exhibit a fair fight. A drone, precisely because it is unmanned, suggests an unfair fight. I am not saying they should never be used, but I am saying that there is a psychological consequence to their use that requires us to qualify assertions about their efficacy. It is not difficult for me to see that some people whose villages are targeted would see a drone strike as cowardly.

The President made some proposals for limiting the use of drones. I do not put much stock in such efforts at self-restraint. In the heat of a future moment, say, after another terrorist attack, Congress or a President will find a way to undue their self-imposed restrictions. He acknowledged the legal issues involved and claimed that the use of drones had always been legal. There, he delivered his best line of the speech, saying that, ?For the record, I do not believe that it would be constitutional for the government to target and kill any American citizen ? with a drone, or a shotgun ? without due process.? My reservations about drones notwithstanding, the President is right to point out there is a certain hysteria, especially on the left, about drones that sees them as more morally challenging than more conventional methods of violence, and that such hysteria is misplaced.

Overall, what was most interesting about the speech was the way the President demonstrated his capacity of

seeing an issue from a variety of angles and with an understanding of the complexities involved. After eight years of the uncomplicated President Bush, such complexity is a welcome thing to witness. Politico?s Glenn Thrush has a review of the speech entitled, ?Obama Debates Obama,? which at first blush seems like an indictment but really isn?t.

The President also placed on display a specifically American cast of mind when it comes to the prosecution of war. In his war memoirs, Winston Churchill commented on the different ways American and British political and military leaders assessed the war effort after a series of meetings at the White House. He wrote:

At Washington intense activity reigned. During these days of continuous contact and discussion, I gathered that the President with his staff and his advisers were preparing an important proposal for me. In the military as in the commercial and production spheres the American mind runs naturally to broad, sweeping, logical conclusions on the largest scale. It is on these that they build their practical thought and action. They feel that once the foundation has been planned on true and comprehensive lines all other stages will follow naturally and almost inevitably. The British mind does not work quite in this way. We do not think that logic and clear-cut principles are necessarily the sole keys to what ought to be done in swiftly changing and indefinable situations. In war particularly we assign a larger importance to opportunism and improvisation, seeking rather to live and conquer in accordance with the unfolding event than to aspire to dominate it often by fundamental decisions. There is room for much argument about both views. The difference is one of emphasis, but it is deep-seated.

President Obama seemed to be trying to lay a foundation yesterday for the use of force against terrorism, and for the limits that properly constrain such use of force. I suspect that the war on terror is better served by the British sense of improvisation and opportunism. But, I also suspect that any American president will display this need that Churchill identified, the need to discern ?broad, sweeping, logical conclusions on the largest scale.? And, I am sure President Obama enjoyed the speech, despite the interruption, for the chance it gave him to speak about something other than Benghazi, the IRS and targeting journalists.

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