Opinion

News



The Democratic presidential nominee, former Vice President Joe Biden, and his wife, Jill Biden, are seen in a video feed from Delaware after winning the votes to become the party's 2020 nominee for president Aug. 18. (CNS/Brian Snyder, Pool via Reuters)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Political conventions have the flavor of a public, secular liturgy. They are scripted. There is a rhythm to the events. And, in the course of the four days, certain themes emerge as totemic, providing the public with a sense of what ideas are central to the party's identity and vision.

The three core totems at this convention, repeated in speech after speech, were racial justice, beating the pandemic and rebuilding the economy. A friend who is close to the campaign told me yesterday, "Why would we get into divisive issues when COVID is the only thing on people's minds?"

The strange virtual manner in which the convention was proceeding showed the truth of his comment, although it was apparent that the campaign understood that, for many Americans, it is the economic fallout from the pandemic, as much as the pandemic itself, that has them worried. And the third theme — the need to continue the march to racial equality — was never off the screen for more than a few minutes.

These are the issues on which the election is being fought and decided. It will be more than curious to see how the Republicans address them next week. Ironically, when CNN took a break during Tuesday night's roll call, there was an ad for Donald Trump that managed to pack more lies about his position on health care than I thought possible. The ad claimed it was Trump, not Joe Biden, who was fighting the pharmaceutical industry and seeking to extend coverage. Next week, NCR may not need a columnist. We will need fact checkers!

Other totems emerged. Monday night, the first totem to make itself felt was diversity. The singing of the national anthem featured people of all ages and colors — and, remarkably, this unsingable song, difficult to pull off when everyone is in the same room, somehow was wonderful, even soaring, with people representing all 50 states and those territories that have delegates to the convention forming a unified, socially distanced choir.

Also interesting that it was the party's nominee, Biden himself, who was tasked with leading the conversation on race with a group of African-American leaders. It was curious that former first lady Michelle Obama did not mention Sen. Kamala Harris. Of course, Obama's talk was pre-recorded, but shouldn't someone have asked her to rerecord it? Shouldn't she have had that thought herself? Harris' selection is, after all, Exhibit A for the diversity meme.

Putting country before party has become an obvious totem, with prominent Republicans speaking on his behalf Monday night, a segment on Biden's enduring friendship with the late Sen. John McCain last night, and the startling fact that former Secretary of State and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell received more speaking time than did Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

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One arm of this particular totem pole is experience, the whole chummy clubbiness of the Senate, and that did not help Secretary Hillary Clinton four years ago and I doubt it will help Biden today. Sen. Chris Coons offered a long list of issues that Biden had been working on throughout his long career, and there is the double-edged sword aspect to an argument from experience: Why was there not more progress made on all those issues on Biden's watch? You can see how the experience argument sets up Trump's populist attack on entrenched elites.

Another arm of the experience totem, being able to get things done, does resonate after watching the Trump administration flail. When I speak with friends who voted for Trump four years ago, they often say they thought that as a businessman, he would be able to get things done, to strike deals, but it hasn't turned out that way.

Undergirding the experience totem is a related theme: competence. This is not an issue that has come up before in such an astonishing manner. There were jokes about Ronald Reagan being only an actor, but he knew his own mind. Toward the end of his second term, his mental capacity was an issue, to be sure, but his team knew what his values were. It seems ridiculous to place the word "values" in the same sentence as the name Donald Trump. Hillary Clinton exuded competence four years ago, but it is the pandemic that has vaulted its significance into focus.

Empathy is the final totem that warrants attention, the former veep's capacity to empathize with people in a variety of life situations being attested by any and all. But let's hold off on that one until Thursday, when we see how Biden communicates it himself.

Just as important as the totems that emerged were those that did not. In 2012, the Democratic convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, was so focused on abortion rights, it was dubbed "Abortion-palooza." The great Melinda Henneberger penned a wonderful critique of the repetitive, singular focus on abortion rights, which she noted intruded into a tribute to Teddy Kennedy, emphasizing his pro-choice stance. "A tireless advocate for the dispossessed, Kennedy was so much more than that — and his party used to be, too," Henneberger sadly observed.

This year, with half the convention done, I do not think I have heard the word "abortion" mentioned. Special interests have touted their ability to make their presence felt at a national convention and in the party platform, whether that presence or platform matter ultimately. This year, in part because the convention was virtual, the campaign exercised much more control over the message and Biden, so far, does not want to be talking about abortion. We can hope that if he wins, the abortion rights groups will have a hard time claiming too much of a share in his mandate.

I am not sure when, or if, the campaign will do something to energize the progressive base of the party. The centrist themes have been strong and they are necessary, but he also needs to articulate just how popular certain progressive policies are: shrinking college debt and providing vocational training for those who do not go to college, raising the minimum wage, extending access to health insurance. These are wildly popular and one can hope the campaign is waiting to let Biden make them his own on Thursday.

Finally, as was the case Monday night, the party used these bizarre circumstances to show and not tell: A traditional keynote address would not have worked, and the multiperson keynote the convention arranged Tuesday night would only work in a virtual setting. The party and campaign is giving us an example of what we are all doing, finding new ways to do what needs to be done.

I thought the roll call did not work, while others liked it, but either way, it happened. If the Trump White House was half as successful in governing the country as the

Dems have proved in mounting a virtual convention, the president's poll numbers might be above 50%. They aren't.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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