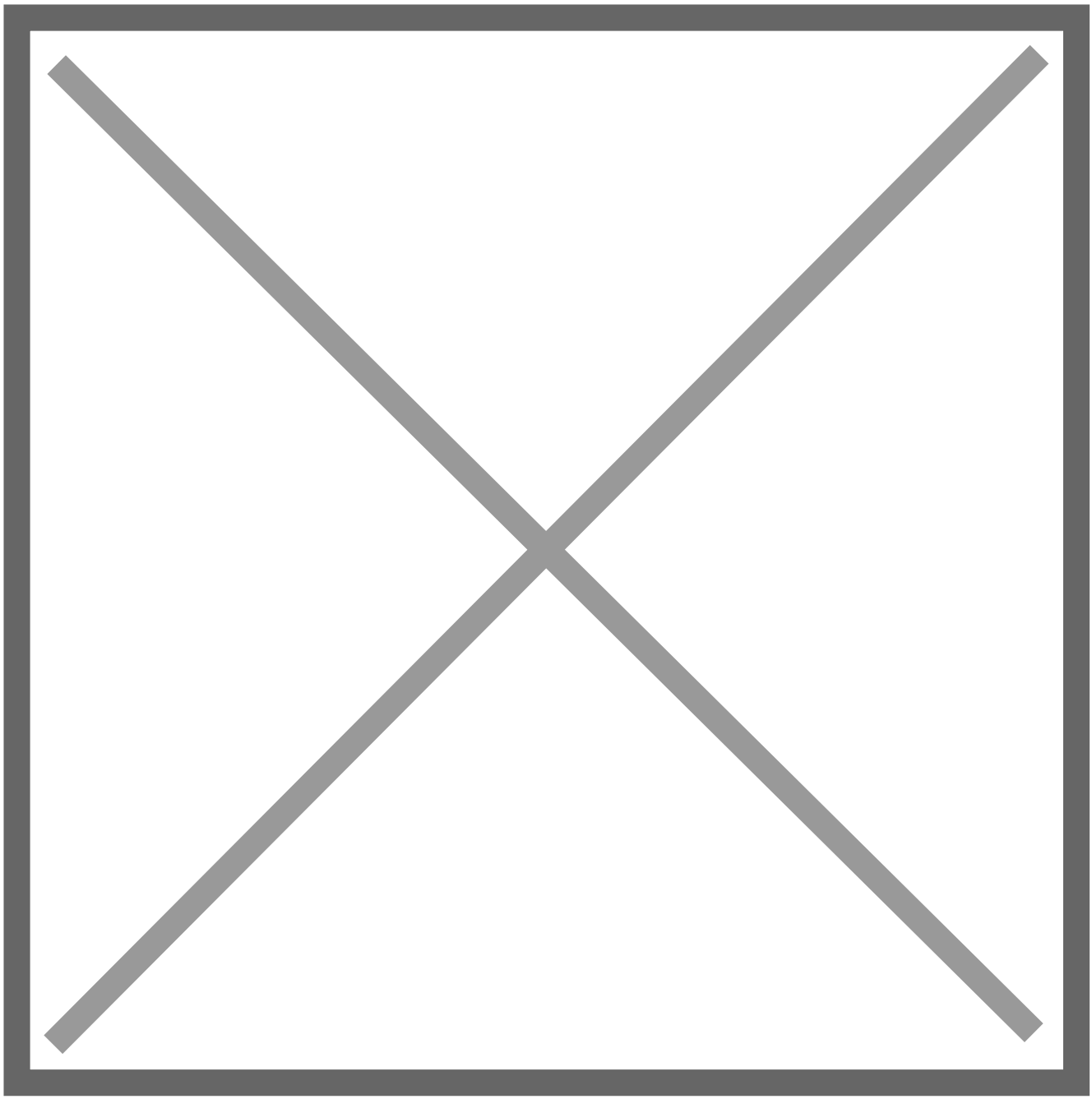
Opinion



President Donald Trump delivers a speech at the Farmers to Families Food Box Program at Flavor First Growers and Packers in Mills River, North Carolina, Aug. 24. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Barria)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 26, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Praise for the president's handling of the economy was the central focus of last night's theme at the Republican National Convention: "Land of Opportunity." But, as we saw Monday night, the schedulers could not stay on message Tuesday either, and they mixed in videos and speeches that had nothing to do with the central economic theme.

The first segment certainly highlighted a profound notion of opportunity, and it contained the most unintentionally funny moment of the night. Jon Ponder, a former felon who founded a successful reentry program, "Hope for Prisoners," spoke movingly about his work. Richard Beasley, the FBI agent who arrested him, and who has since worked with Ponder to build up his reentry program, recalled that Ponder called him when he got out of prison, and they met for lunch at McDonald's.

Beasley said that Ponder arrived carrying a Bible and that he had seen some people carry the Bible "as a prop" but he knew that for Ponder it was no prop. I am sure I was not the only person whose mind flashbacked to the picture of President Donald Trump posing for a photo op in front of St. John's Episcopal Church holding a Bible, after having cleared Lafayette Square of peaceful protesters with tear gas.

At first, I thought this was a mistake, a casualty of the rushed effort to mount a virtual convention. But it was no mistake. It was a classic technique of

misinformation: Identify your greatest weakness and muddy the waters. If possible, charge your opponent with possessing the same weakness. Take the charges against you and deflect them. Make sure that when people hear the words "he used the Bible as a prop," they are no longer sure who is being referenced.

And so we were also treated to the Rev. Billy Graham's granddaughter, Cissie Graham Lynch, voicing her support for the president who said he had never asked God for forgiveness and warning that the "Biden-Harris vision of America leaves no room for faith."

We heard Pam Bondi, the former Florida attorney general who once received — and returned — a $25,000 campaign contribution from Trump's charitable organization, explaining that Joe Biden had enriched his children, repeating all the sordid facts, and a few fables, regarding Hunter Biden's dealings with the Ukrainian company Burisma.

It was brutal, but it was effective: The younger Biden's behavior in his dealings with the foreign energy company really were despicable, although they pale by comparison to the Trump family's willingness to make money from their official role. Bondi's allegations against Joe Biden were demonstrably false. Nonetheless, the misinformation was achieved.

Advertisement

The president's daughter, Tiffany Trump, fretted about media manipulation with its "biased, fabricated point-of-view." She said her father had "built a thriving economy once, and he will do it again." Earlier, Larry Kudlow, the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, had been more specific, and tendentious, saying that "the economy was rebuilt in three years." I seem to remember the economy doing just fine in 2016. It was Barack Obama who inherited a terrible economy in 2008 and had to rebuild it.

The First Lady, Melania Trump, who closed out the night, was introduced by a video that mentioned her "Be Best" initiative, which seeks to keep children from indulging pathological behavior on the internet. In her speech, she warned against the "mean" social media and the "downside of technology." She failed to look down at her husband and say, "So, Donald, cut it out." Once again, this was misinformation on an

almost cosmic scale.

Abby Johnson, the controversial former Planned Parenthood employee who has become a pro-life activist, has a great story to tell, even if some journalists argue the story is not true. Her speech was powerful and effective. Over-the-top? Yes. Trump's base warms to the kind of graphic description of the violence of a surgical abortion Johnson offered. I wonder if moderate, centrist women would not prefer the euphemisms that accompany standard discussion of the issue.

Nonetheless, the pre-pandemic economy was destined to be a prominent sub-theme throughout the convention. Before the pandemic hit, the national unemployment rate was 3.5%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In Iowa, the rate was 2.7%, which might explain why Trump continues to do so well in the polls there. And, in the key swing state of Florida, the rate was 3%. These are remarkable numbers.

The president has long touted the performance of the stock market as an indicator not only of the effectiveness of his policies but as an indicator of future economic growth.

"Since my election, U.S. stock markets have soared 70%, adding more than $12 trillion to our nation's wealth, transcending anything anyone believed was possible. This is a record," the president said in his Feb. 4 State of the Union address. He explained the practical significance of the rise, saying: "All of those millions of people with 401(k)s and pensions are doing far better than they have ever done before with increases of 60, 70, 80, 90 and 100%, and even more."

Democrats can't simply ignore that, and it is worse than futile to try and explain that Trump's deregulation and tax cuts amounted to an unsustainable sugar-high for the economy. Better to argue that while Trump's business acumen might have been helpful in normal times, these are not normal times: The current recession is in danger of becoming a depression and, as the country learned in the 1930s, only government economic intervention can cope with that.

The skills needed to direct a rebuilding of the economy are different from those a businessman might acquire. As well, in the current moment, when so many millions of Americans are in danger of losing their homes or apartments, when they have no money to buy medicines, when people are lining up for hours to get a free bag of groceries, only a bottom-up infusion of funds, not a trickle-down tax cut, will provide

immediate relief. Only government intervention in the economy can possibly even keep the recession from tipping into a depression.

There is another problem with the president's touting his economic success: It clashes with the populism with which he surrounds every other issue. At a time when Jeff Bezos is making millions per day, Americans will have a hard time believing that increasing taxes on the rich is a bad idea.

At a time when so many Americans are hurting, it is much easier for Biden to present himself as the people's champion than the billionaire incumbent. The president's limited capacity for empathy was repeatedly seen in its full, stilted, contrived essence every time Trump appeared with ordinary people in videos during this convention. If body language can communicate indifference to the woes of others, Trump's body language did precisely that.

On both CNN and MSNBC, there was much fretting about the violation of traditional democratic norms: The secretary of state speaking at a partisan convention, the use of federal buildings as the backdrops for speeches, and most astonishingly the swearing-in ceremony for new citizens that became a partisan prop last night. Stop it. This is exactly what Trump wants you talking about.

Of course, these violations of democratic norms are deeply problematic, but they are not new, and those who vote based on such issues have long since decided to vote against Trump. Democrats need to focus only on those lies and norm-breaking that affect people in real time and in concrete ways. We are in the midst of a pandemic, and only well-paid talking heads on TV have the luxury to fret about democratic norms.

What was new, and what the Democrats should focus on, is that it took all of two days before someone at this convention, in this case the first lady, voiced a word of sympathy for those who have died from COVID-19.

Kudlow spoke about the virus in the past tense, and the virus is not done with its devastation. There is a certain unreality hovering over this administration that was on full display last night, as was the KGB-quality effort to morph reality into its opposite. If that effort works, the country is lost, truly lost.

The way to make sure that does not happen is for Democrats to ignore the last night's norm-breaking, stop talking about the book by Trump's niece and the quotes

from his sister, and whether or not the Hatch Act was being violated at this convention.

Trump's lies and incompetence are largely responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of our fellow citizens. *Punto*.

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

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes newDistinctly Catholic columns.*

This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.