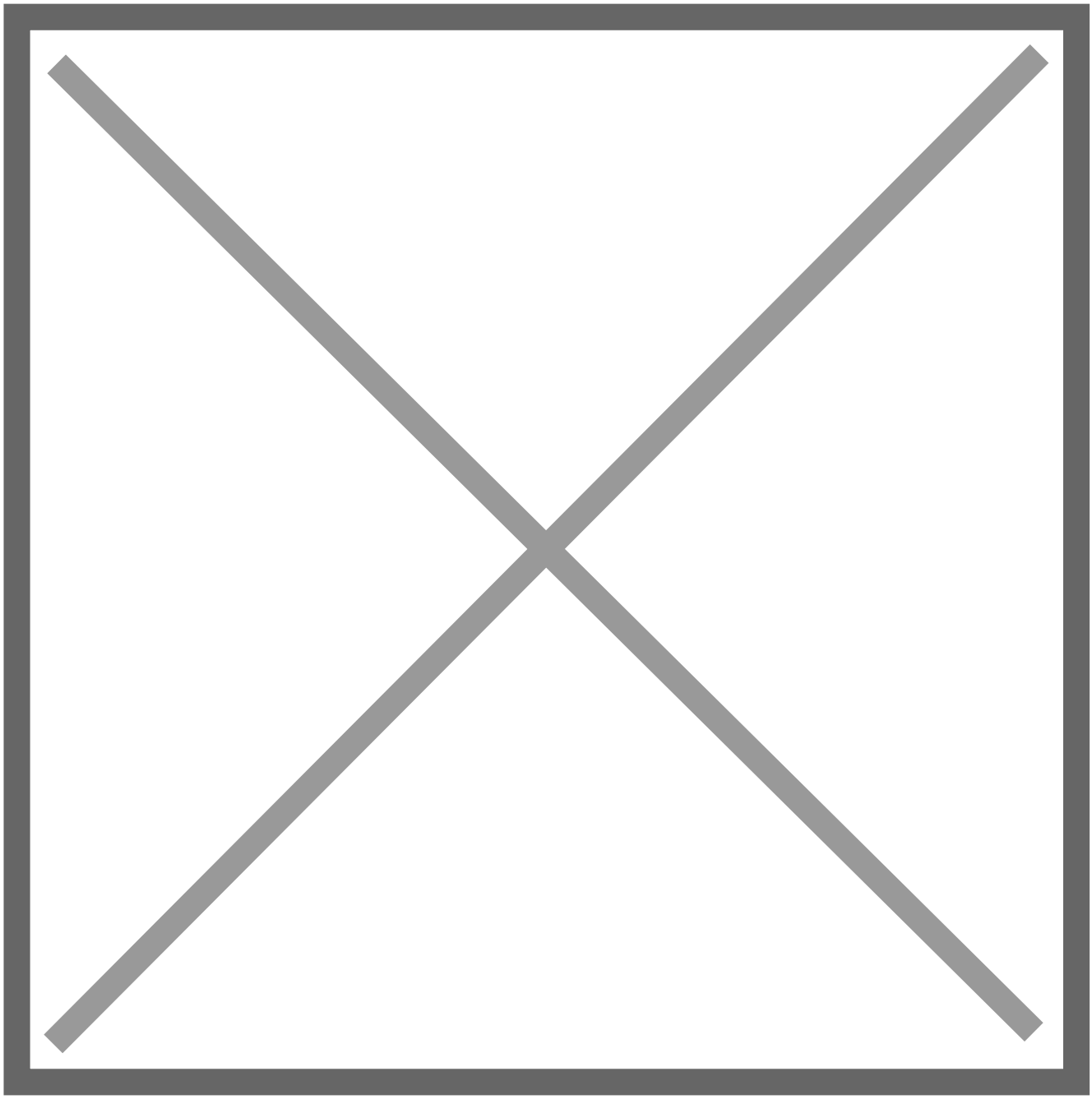
Opinion
News



U.S. first lady Melania Trump delivers her live address to the largely virtual Republican National Convention from the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington Aug. 25. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)



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 27, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Last night, the Republican National Convention took as its theme "Land of Heroes." With such a theme, I anticipated sap, and that the shift from policy to personality would invite yet more of the adulation of the president we witnessed on the first two nights. I was not disappointed, but I was surprised at how imprecise the message was.

If you are as old as me, you may recall dancing into the wee hours to Bonnie Tyler's song "Holding Out for a Hero." The lyrics were not particularly specific:

> *I need a hero*
>
> *I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night*
>
> *He's gotta be strong*
>
> *And he's gotta be fast*
>
> *And he's gotta be fresh from the fight*

Fast at what? What fight? Strong in what way?

That was how last night felt. Donald Trump is great. Donald Trump is a champion. Donald Trump is the best. The speakers were short on specifics. The speeches were like those horrible posters in suburban office complexes that feature an eagle in flight or an expansive vista, with a single, contentless noun stamped on the top: "Excellence" or "Success." I always wish I had a magic marker when I see one of them. I want to cross out the contentless noun and write "Vapid" or "Vacuity" instead. It all felt very gauzy.

Hoping that genuine heroism might rub off on our comically unheroic president, a man incapable of taking responsibility for anything that is not a success, the convention organizers alternated speeches about real heroes with the homages to Trump.

Gov. Kristi Noem of South Dakota gave the first speech, and her heroes were James Madison and Abraham Lincoln. But she went on to say that their legacy could only be secured by her other hero, Donald Trump. She was followed by White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany, whose only hero is Trump.

Karen Pence, the wife of Vice President Mike Pence, spoke about the administration's work on behalf of military families, rightly celebrating these heroes who protect the nation and their families. She was followed by Senior Counselor Kellyanne Conway, and the only hero she honored was her chief, the Donald.

It was not until New York Congressman Lee Zeldin spoke halfway through the night that anyone spoke on behalf of the most obvious heroes of the moment, our frontline health care workers. He, too, celebrated Trump's efforts to get personal protective equipment to those workers, although many public health officials argue that the federal assistance was too little, and too late.

Vice President Pence did recognize frontline workers as heroes when he gave the evening's closing speech. He praised Trump because he "enacted an economic rescue package," which was an interesting item to highlight seeing as so many of the night's other speakers condemned the Democrats as socialists. When the government pumps trillions of dollars into businesses large and small, what is that other than socialism?

Pence also claimed that Trump's decision to stop travel from China early in the pandemic "bought us valuable time." To what end? Pence listed several things the administration did, but it was not enough. You can compare the number of cases or

the number of deaths in the U.S. with the grim totals in other countries, and our performance in confronting the virus has been miserable -- especially during this summer after Trump pushed for the economy to reopen too soon and without the necessary precautions or adequate testing in place.

Advertisement

This being the party of Donald Trump, the encomiums for the president and other heroes were interspersed with some really outrageous claims. The night began with Aryeh Spero, an Orthodox rabbi known to support right-wing causes, who prayed for the president because he "has stood up fearlessly against those who are corrupting the term social justice so as to deny Americans their birthright and these divine gifts." Whom did he mean? Advocates for gun control? Those who believe liberty must be exercised with a responsibility to the common good? Isaiah?

Noem, in praising the work of the founders, cited several of the rights guaranteed our citizenry by the Bill of Rights, including: the "right to arm ourselves as a counter-balance to a standing army." What? I understand the eighteenth-century founders had great fears about the bad effects of standing armies, but the U.S. has had a standing army since the 1790s. Does the governor think that the camouflage-wearing, gun-toting thugs who marched into the state capitol in Lansing, Michigan , earlier this year are a "counter-balance" to the U.S. Army?

McEnany spoke movingly about the president's personal solicitude towards her when she had a preventive mastectomy. But she claimed his kindness meant that he "stands by people with pre-existing conditions" — when he actually tried to repeal the Affordable Care Act, including its protections for people with pre-existing conditions without having anything to replace it. And the administration is still trying to overturn the ACA in the federal courts.

Famed Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz has a serious man-crush on the president. Apparently, in addition to his gifts as a coach, Holtz helps the Holy Spirit out in discerning human hearts. He called Joe Biden "Catholic in name only." How would Holtz know? And who is he to judge? I wish Biden was more concerned about extending his deep sense of solidarity to the unborn, but you do not need to know much about Biden to know how seriously he takes his faith. Holtz should apologize for this terrible slur.

One of the most outrageous and inappropriate moments came when Sr. Deirdre Byrne spoke. A member of the Little Workers of the Sacred Hearts, Byrne did not offer a prayer, as Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell did at the Democratic National Convention last week. She offered an endorsement.

"Donald Trump is the most pro-life president this nation has ever had, defending life at all stages," said Byrne. "His belief in the sanctity of life transcends politics." I understand some of the speeches were pre-recorded. Was this one recorded before the pandemic hit?

If a convention exists to communicate a message, this week's Republican convention is a nightmare. The message has been muddled and delivered scattershot on all three nights so far.

But last night was the worst as the focus on personality rather than politics left one feeling like the convention was all cotton candy, except that every other bite of this cotton candy was intensely bitter.

It might have excited the base, but anyone already lukewarm about Trump found nothing to make them enthusiastic, still less to get out and vote for him.

[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.