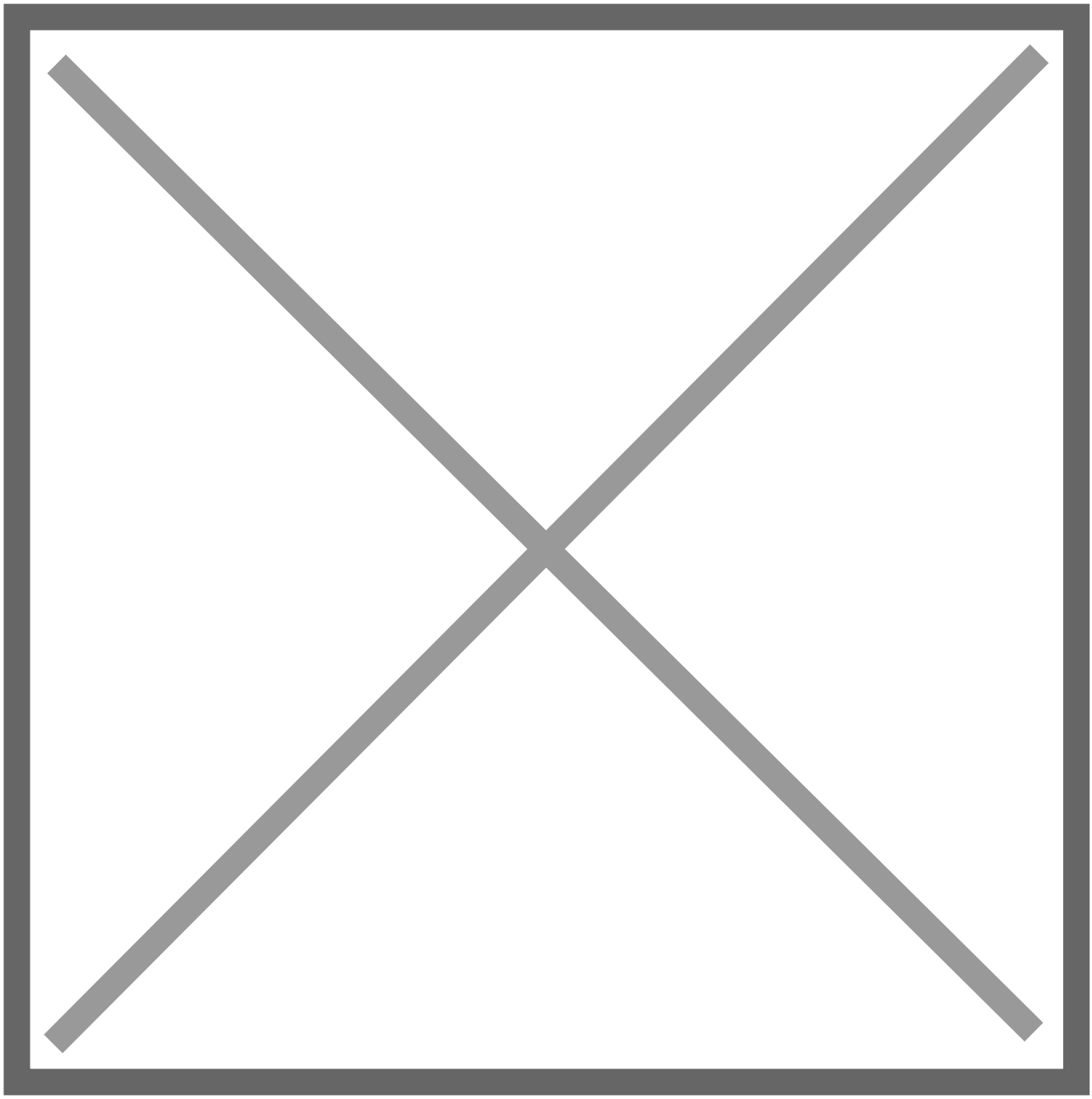
Opinion
News



President Donald Trump, right, and first lady Melania Trump are seen during the Republican National Convention Aug. 26, held that night at Fort McHenry in Baltimore. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



by Michael Sean Winters

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In recent years, Americans have been largely disgusted by politics. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 was an exception, when most of the country recognized that electing our first Black president was a major milestone. But the good feelings did not last, an especially vicious partisanship gripped Washington anew, and the rise of the Tea Party in 2010 demonstrated that the center of gravity in the Republican Party was shifting in a decidedly populist manner.

Four years ago, when everyone thought there was no way Hillary Clinton could lose, millions voted for Donald Trump as a protest vote. They wanted to send a signal by voting for Trump.

Some, who thought he might win, felt confident Trump might grow into the job. Others thought that as a businessman, he could make deals, end the stagnation inside the Beltway, and if he broke some rules and flouted some norms, they did not really care. They responded overwhelmingly well to his indictment of the canon of political correctness, which is nothing more than the snobbery appropriate to identity politics. And, lest we forget, summer 2016 was a time of peace and prosperity.

The summer of 2020 is not a time of peace or prosperity. The nation does not have the luxury of fixating on the problem that is political correctness. We yearn for real

answers to the problems of systemic racism, not facile language about a few bad apples among the police forces — language we Catholics recall was used to explain clergy sex abuse until it became obvious that the culture nurtured the bad apples, it did not expel them, and that was the real problem. The need to rebuild the economy is acute and yet not once, not once this week did the president or any of his acolytes put forward specific economic proposals beyond warning that the Democrats are really socialists, as if the $4 trillion stimulus Trump signed this spring was not socialism? We need some socialism this year.

None of this would be obvious if you had relied only on the GOP convention to tell you what is going on in the country. The theme of the final night was "America: Land of Greatness," and it turns out that the things the Republicans are really great at are denial and deceit.

"Law and order" has long been a mantra of rightwing populism, but to hear Mike Pence and Rudy Giuliani tell it, Joe Biden was the one throwing Molotov cocktails in the streets of Minneapolis and Portland, Oregon.

If you relied on the many small businesspeople who spoke at the GOP convention, the Obama years were a time of economic decline, not a time of unprecedented, consistent job growth. And while they oppose socialism, they were grateful for the Paycheck Protection Program that kept them afloat this year. Unless you listened closely this week, you would not even know there was a pandemic facing the country: It was mentioned in passing only, and only to praise the president's response.

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The last speaker of the convention was Trump himself, and his speech was impossibly long and surprisingly flat. His attack on Biden and the Democrats was simple and, in part, effective: "So tonight I ask you a simple question: How can the Democrat Party ask to lead our country when it spends so much time tearing down our country?"

I did not hear Biden "tear down" the country. I heard him call the nation to an examination of conscience and conversion. But no one should think Trump's line of attack fell flat. People are not afraid of answering a call to improvement, but they

also want to feel good about their country, and too often those on the left do nothing but bemoan the American experiment.

Trump addressed the pandemic, but it was impossible to count the distortions. Regarding COVID-19, the Republicans are fast and furious when it comes to trying to deceive. The president said: "We developed from scratch the largest and most advanced testing system anywhere in the world. America has tested more than every country in Europe put together, and more than every nation in the Western Hemisphere combined. Think of that." Okay. Per capita, the winner when it comes to testing and confronting the pandemic is South Korea, and people know it. The testing regime here in the U.S. has been a disaster.

Trump continued: "We developed a wide array of effective treatments, including a powerful antibody treatment known as convalescent plasma. You saw that on Sunday night when we announced it. That will save thousands and thousands of lives." Last week, Trump heralded the Food and Drug Administration's decision to fast-track the use of blood plasma in patients with COVID-19 as "a major therapeutic breakthrough." On Tuesday, the Commissioner of the FDA, Stephen Hahn, apologized for overstating the life-saving benefits of the treatment.

Trump repeated the canard that the words "under God" had been removed from the Pledge of Allegiance at last week's Democratic National Convention. This has been proven to be bunk.

"Your vote will decide whether we protect law-abiding Americans or whether we give free rein to violent anarchists and agitators and criminals who threaten our citizens," the president said. But I have not heard any Democrat, and certainly not Joe Biden, say they wish to give "free rein" to anarchists, agitators and criminals.

After talking about the looting and the "defund the police" movement, which Biden has pointedly said he does not support, Trump said: "No one will be safe in Biden's America." Do people feel safe in Trump's America? If the eradication of racism is a necessary prerequisite for the resolution of racial tension, does anyone think Trump will help eradicate racism?

The difficulty for Trump this year is that the evidence of the bad news is too palpable. At a campaign stop in Iowa in 2016, Trump famously claimed: "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any

voters, OK?" And that might be true but only because many of his most fervent supporters have never been to Fifth Avenue and wouldn't go if they could. They might, however, have a loved one in a nursing home who died from the virus, or a friend who is a nurse at the local ICU who worked around the clock for weeks on end trying to save lives.

They know someone who has lost their job because of the virus, and not in March when the whole country shut down, but in the summer when Trump's breezy eagerness to reopen the economy without providing enough tests or any contact tracing system doomed thousands to an untimely death and pushed a return to normalcy even further away.

They know the economy is lousy, that every week a million Americans are filing for unemployment. They know that as it gets colder, those restaurants which reopened in the summer with outdoor seating may have to close again. They know someone who is unemployed and who has lost the $600 stipend that allowed them to pay the bills and pay the rent, but who is now worried about being able to do either thing.

And they know that the sources of the violence in the streets of our cities are many and complicated. They know it is morally indecent to worry about the destruction of a store window and say nothing about the murder of unarmed Black men by officers of the state.

They know Biden is not a raving socialist.

Trump is betting people will not believe their lyin’ eyes. It is a big bet.

Instead of articulating a consistent theme, the Republicans introduced more hero worship of Donald Trump than most Americans are comfortable with. At a time when the president's approval/disapproval numbers are underwater, 54.3% to 42.2%, according to Five-Thirty Eight, the endless focus on Trump himself strikes me as a strategic blunder of the highest order.

Having watched every night of both conventions, it is hard to believe the Republicans have much of a case to make: They can't elide the fact that all the rioting and looting, and all the COVID-19 deaths, and all the economic pain are happening on Trump's watch, not Biden's. For every person Trump brought back into the fold, I expect he alienated another person whose vote he needs.

Still, look for this contest to tighten in the coming weeks as almost always happens going to the autumn. It is white knuckle time.

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

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