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What it Means to be an American

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Jonathan Martin and Ben Smith have a very important article up today at Politico entitled, "The new battle: What it means to be an American." They argue that Obama's push for various reform efforts in health care, financial regulations, the size and scope of government, his support for the Bush-sponsored bailouts of Wall Street and his own decision to bailout Detroit, all have shifted the focus away from the "social issues" that used to drive the GOP to a different, and in a sense, deeper issue of what it means to be an American.

I agree with almost all of Martin's and Smith's analysis, but with modifications. For example, they write, "Illegal immigration is perhaps the only cultural issue currently animating Americans, and that's in part because of its economic component." It is one of the hallmarks of any nation's attempt at a self-definition to start by saying what we are not. The debate over immigration lapses into racism so easily not because of "its economic component" but because undocumented immigrants make an easy target. The same is true of the grotesque way even President Obama is forced to deny he is a Muslim, as if there is something wrong with being a Muslim. (Dear Mr. President - the next time you have to assert that you are not a Muslim, please add the hope that someday America could elect a Muslim to the presidency.)

As well, if abortion and gay rights have faded as hot button issues, we have been reading different newspapers. Much of the most contentious debate surrounding health care reform was focused on the effects the reform would have on abortion funding and, indeed, that was the last issue the Democrats had to overcome in the House and Senate to pass the reform measures. And, the battle over gay rights seems as contentious as ever, and has certainly been dominating recent news coverage.

Where Martin and Smith are strongest is when they point to the divide between the libertarian wing of the GOP and the social conservatives among white evangelicals. The libertarian sensibility, I would scarcely

call it a philosophy, is even more obvious among Republican-leaning independent voters whom the Republicans need to bring home if they want to win in a general election. This rift may be less significant in the midterm elections which are a group of individual, local elections. A southern Republican can hammer the social issues and a western Republican can hammer the libertarian issues and both can win. This rift will define the GOP primary battle for the presidency, and the rift is deep. Martin and Smith quote a gay Republican leader, Chris Barron, saying, "It's hard to be preaching the gospel of smaller government while at the same time talking about putting the government into people's bedrooms. It's not a coherent message."

Mr. Barron is right, of course, at one level, but he misses the defining quality of the Tea Party libertarians and the evangelical right, and that quality is more psychological than it is political. Both groups provide a sense of certainty in a time of economic uncertainty. For the Tea Party, it is as clear as day that the health care reform violates the Constitution. For the evangelicals, Judge Vaughn Walker's ruling in favor of gay marriage violates the Bible. The Tea Party crowd is endlessly invoking the Founders in the exact same way that the Fundamentalists invoke Scripture. They overlook the more than two hundred years of legal rulings interpreting that document in the same way Fundamentalists look askance at the two thousand years of biblical interpretation. But, when your home might be foreclosed, when you wonder if you are going to lose your health care, when your cousin just lost her job, well, certainty may be more important than any particular policy issue.

This desire for certainty has found in President Obama an almost perfect foil. It may be a congenital problem for liberalism in America that it has trouble sounding any trumpet but an uncertain one. Look at the way the President forcefully endorsed the First Amendment rights of Muslims to build a mosque near Ground Zero only to appear to equivocate the next day. The President has a fine mind, and fine minds are known for making distinctions. But, when people are unsure of the direction of the country ? and when they are uncertain about the prospects for their own future ? they do not want fine distinctions, they want certainty.

N.B. For more intensive analysis of the role of Fundamentalists in the political life of the nation, readers will have to await for my forthcoming biography of Rev. Jerry Falwell, due out next year.

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