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Palin's Power

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Former Governor Sarah Palin gave her first post-election speech last night at a fundraiser in Pennsylvania. CNN cut into its talk-show "Parker-Spitzer" to broadcast the speech live. As well, this week, Palin's reality TV show begins. And, of course, the counting of write-in ballots in her home state of Alaska will determine if her hand-picked candidate Joe Miller will defeat Palin's long-time nemesis Sen. Lisa Murkowski. So, we can expect to see a lot of the smiling Queen Mama Grizzly this week.

And, not just this week. Alas, all signs point to Palin seeking the presidency. Why not? She is easily the most recognizable face in the GOP ranks. She and Newt Gingrich are the only two prospective candidates that do not invite slumber. She has raised tons of money and exposure for candidates all over the country, most especially Tea Party favorites like Nikki Haley, the incoming Governor of South Carolina and Kelly Ayotte, the incoming Senator in New Hampshire, two states that play a critical role in securing the GOP nomination.

Palin has done more than simply be a good fundraiser for the cause. She has managed her own image in a fast-changing political, and technological, environment. Who else has the power, as Palin does, to alter the national discussion with a twitter feed? Her regular appearances on Fox News keep her regularly in front of the Amen-corner of the GOP. Her reality TV show will reach millions who do not necessarily care about politics but tune in to watch those insipid reality shows. She has paid no price whatsoever for her decision to resign as governor halfway through her term. Palin is, in the parlance of the web, viral.

Palin has also been able to maintain her status as a scrappy underdog. The attacks on her only feed the narrative, a narrative that is swallowed whole by the Fox News crowd, that the mainstream media is out to get her, that the media's normal and important function in a democracy of screening candidates has been twisted unfairly to bring her down. Americans love cheering for an underdog. Palin loves her enemies.

She is also earthy. Her speech in Pennsylvania began with a lot of talk about her children. When she talks about the men and women in the military, she speaks first about her son. When she talks about the difficulties of unwed motherhood, she is talking about her daughter. All of her stories talk about the values her children exhibit, and Palin, like Reagan, is exceedingly comfortable talking about values in a way that, to cite only one example, President Obama is not. Palin may not grasp the intricacies of policy, but neither did Reagan and that did not hurt him any. Her patriotic incantations work their magic. They may be vague. They may be meaningless. But, they are heartfelt and that comes through the airwaves.

There is only demonstrable chink in the Palin armor and it may be her undoing should she choose to run for the presidency. She does not evidence self-discipline. Reagan was dismissed as a former actor, but actors are famously disciplined. Obama, both as a candidate and as president, is extraordinarily disciplined. Hillary Clinton was able to keep the Democratic primaries going until the very end because she, too, is a very disciplined person. The stress and strain and spotlight of a presidential run require an enormous amount of discipline and nothing in Palin's repertoire shows that she has much of it.

This morning's Post has an article by Kathleen Parker about Palin, about the dread many mainstream, establishment Republicans feel when they contemplate her candidacy. They are right to fear it. The establishment has no one who can compete with her. The Tea Party proved last week that it cannot necessarily win a general election. Christine O'Donnell, Sharron Angle, and Ken Buck all lost their bids for office. But, all three defeated more establishment candidates in their GOP primaries. The Tea Party may not be able to elect Palin to the White House but there is no one who can stop her from gaining the Republican nomination if she chooses to seek it.

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