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What Should Obama Say Tonight?

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Many of us on the political left, who generally find ourselves in agreement with President Obama, are dreading tonight's speech on deficit reduction. But, the same emotion can come from different sources in different people, so I want to make crystal clear what I believe the President should, and should not say, tonight.

Let me start by separating myself from some liberal criticisms of the President. There is a headline on the front page of this morning's *Washington Post* that reads, "Obama risks losing liberals," in which various D.C.-based liberal activists deride the focus on deficits, and insist that the President should be focusing on job creation. Those activists say the Republicans have won the messaging war, requiring this focus on cutting the deficit. Both points are true: The President should be focusing on jobs and the GOP has won the messaging war.

But, there is an unhappy irony in the leftie critique. Over the past six months since the November election, most liberal advocacy groups have earned as much of the blame for losing the messaging war to the GOP as the President. An awful lot of journalistic ink, lobbying dollars and the like were spent by liberals on the repeal of "Don't Ask; Don't Tell" before Christmas. Now, mind you, I am glad that a policy that is unjust has been repealed, but it did detract from the focus on jobs. Since January, I seem to have read a lot more articles about budget cuts at NPR and Planned Parenthood than about budget cuts in job re-training programs. Many liberals were upset that the President did not use the Tucson shooting to build support for stricter gun laws. The President did find time to give a speech on school bullying when he was opposed and so am I—but that doesn't have anything to do with jobs either. In short, the Democrats have been undisciplined in delivering a message on jobs, the GOP has been remarkably disciplined on cutting spending, and "voilà" the left lost the messaging war. The same people who criticize the President for "caving" to the right's agenda have put the President in a spot where he has little choice but to cave.

Also, Obama should forget about "losing liberals." To whom? From the looks of the GOP primary field, the left will find plenty to motivate them to get to the polls for Obama next year. This is the same crowd that solemnly vowed they would never support health care reform unless it contained a public option. Well, guess what? Of course they supported health care without a public option.

The President needs to start moving to a better spot tonight. In addition to adopting the position that compromise is not a bad word, which comes a little too naturally to Obama (and to the last Democratic President Bill Clinton, for whom everything was negotiable), he needs to draw a couple of lines in the sand. For example, he could say that he will never sign any law that changes the benefits seniors have a right to expect from Social Security. He can say that while we need to save money on Medicare and Medicaid, those savings must come from reducing the cost of health care, not from the pockets of seniors. Obama can say that while he is open to negotiations on the particulars regarding an overhaul of the tax code, a 14 volume tax code is an insult to the idea of self-governance, and he wants it slashed, just as Reagan did in the 1980s.

The President also needs to start confronting some myths that have entered the lexicon of both left and right. One is the idea that we must eliminate loopholes and lower corporate tax rates. There is no necessary economic correlation between those two policy goals. Most of the loopholes go to large corporations and mostly small companies (you know, "small business, the engine of job growth?") pay the full amount. But, while the country is trying to get its fiscal house in order, would it not be better to close the loopholes now and only lower the rates when the budget is back in surplus? Like a cherry on a sundae. Another is the idea that lower tax rates for the super-rich spur job growth. Job growth comes with an expanding economy and many factors contribute to such expansion. But, the 90's were pretty good in terms of economic expansion and job growth, so it is a little funny to see the Republicans playing "chicken little" about the prospect of returning to the tax rates of the Clinton years. Heaven forbid we should go back to the rates that existed under Reagan when the top rate was 50 percent!

The President is well advised to also introduce some new considerations into the policy mix. For example, on tax policy, Democrats have established a cut-off: if you make less than \$250,000, you will not see your taxes raise, but if you make more, you will. I am all for raising taxes on those who make more than \$250,000. But, it is also true that if you are a family living in Manhattan or the Bay Area, given the cost of real estate, that \$250,000 income may result in a decidedly middle class lifestyle. So, while we can raise taxes on those making more than \$250,000 per year, the President should introduce a surcharge on millionaires, and an additional surcharge on billionaires, to help close the fiscal gap. The motto, a slightly updated version of JFK's inaugural mantra, with the verb tense changed: "America has been good to you; It is time for you to be good to America."

The great worry I have about Obama is that when you peel away the layers, he is a wonk and he is surrounded by wonks, all of whom are, like himself, very successful. None of them have ever lived paycheck to paycheck. None of them worry about their retirement plans or their health care costs. The President seems to approach large problems like the deficit in economic not in human terms, and that is a big problem because the only way he and the Democrats can beat back the GOP on these issues is if we stand up for the middle class and the promises that have been made to them. Indeed, the Republicans have given the Democrats an opportunity to reclaim their soul as the party of FDR in this fight. But, I worry that Obama is more attuned to satisfying Tim Geithner's economic models than he is to the felt-need of seniors for someone to defend Medicare.

I wish Obama's speech tonight was being written by "well, let's be honest, I wish I was writing it! But, seriously, I wish that Msgr. John A. Ryan was still around to whisper into the President's ear: Fight for

the little guy! Or, that the President read the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew last night. The Democrats need to stand up for those who do not have lobbyists on K Street, those who may not have been extraordinarily successful economically in their lives, those who worked hard and played by the rules and are really, deeply angry that the GOP not wants to change the rules. The President, thank God, does not operate from his gut, but he needs to show a little gustiness tonight. If he doesn't, he may win next year, he may lose, but if he misses this historic opportunity to bring the Democrats back to their roots, his will not be a successful presidency.

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