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Obama Hits a Home Run

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 14, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

President Obama hit a home run yesterday with his speech on deficit reduction. He articulated clearly the conflict of visions that is at the heart of the battle over the budget numbers ? and hopefully, the positive response to the speech will encourage him to keep talking about his values! And, while the speech was better than the policy proposals, the policy was good enough for now.

It is important for Americans to be reminded of the two intertwined ideas that constitute our national character, our rugged individualism and our sense that we are bound to each other, and the President began his speech by reminding us of both ideas. He used language similar to that he employed in his 2004 keynote to the Democratic National Convention, the speech that launched his career. Yesterday, he was actually being a bit kind to some contemporary Republicans who do not celebrate rugged individualism; they celebrate a kind of Ayn Randian ?success? that is as positively creepy as it is vacuous, a view of the world that separates human beings into losers and winners, which, I submit are not categories found in Catholic social teaching.

Yesterday, I urged the President to draw some lines in the sand, and he certainly did that. He said that he would not consent to any further extensions of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy and, on that score, he not only drew a line in the sand but demonstrated how those tax cuts were largely responsible for landing us in the fiscal mess we face. Next year, some college students will go to the polls: will they even recall that only 12 years ago, the nation was running a surplus, not a deficit? Were the tax rates during the Clinton years that oppressive?

The more important line the President draw was around Medicare and Social Security. If Democrats can?t agree to defend these two basic cornerstones of our social compact, they can?t agree about anything. Obama is on sound terrain when he stated that the way to cut Medicare was by lowering the cost of health care, not by turning Medicare into a voucher program. GOP arguments that their proposals for Medicare would achieve the benefits we have seen with the Medicare Prescription Drug benefit fail for factual as well as ideological reasons. Show me a business plan that any insurance company might draft as to how they can make money insuring the elderly? And while Social Security is more solvent than Medicare, there are plenty of things we can do to strengthen the system short of raising the retirement age. Social Security taxes are among the most regressive in America: Lifting the cap on wages subject to those taxes or, more ambitiously, making all income, not just wages, subject to Social Security taxes would go a long way to shoring up the Social Security Trust Fund.

President Obama, unlike the GOP, also put the Pentagon?s bloated budget on the table. Certainly, as the war in Iraq winds down and, hopefully, the war in Afghanistan does so too, our immediate costs for the military will shrink. But, there may develop other exigencies that demand military spending. Nonetheless, there are some security threats that seem sufficiently remote that we need no longer fund programs to counter-act them. Why do we still need so many bases in Europe? Why do we still need so many submarines? Why do we still need so many stock-piled nuclear weapons?

I do wish the President had spent more time addressing the need to simplify the tax code. This is an issue of fairness. Predictably, last night, the talking heads on Fox warned that Obama?s plan to raise taxes would hit small business owners and that this could hurt job creation. Of course, they misunderstand the way a small

business works: You hire more workers when you need more workers, when the amount of business activity requires more workers, not when you happen to have some extra cash laying around. But, most small businesses do not benefit from the volumes of loopholes that have crept into the tax code. Big companies, like GE, pay no taxes. The mom-and-pop store on the corner pays its taxes. Simplifying the code, and lowering rates, would benefit small business. Indeed, as the President and Congress gear up for another round of negotiations pertaining to the need to raise the debt ceiling, this is an issue on which some common ground might be achieved.

Many of us on the left were concerned that the President might be a little too conciliatory in his address yesterday. Instead, he hit exactly the right tone. He was firm, but not intransigent. He turned the debate about the deficit from one in which the GOP owned the issue to one in which the debate is about means, not ends. And, most importantly, he defended the accomplishments of, and the values that undergird, the New Deal and Medicare in making our society more humane. When Democrats fight on these issues, instead of social issues, they win. The President not only answered the GOP yesterday, he laid the groundwork for the debate the nation will have in 2012.

One other note. The President engaged the budget proposals of Cong. Paul Ryan in broad strokes and philosophically, not in the particulars. But, let?s wait and see if the Ryan budget makes it past the GOP-controlled House. If it does, if a majority of House Republicans vote to gut Medicare, the Democrats can look to win back the House in 2012. What is important for President Obama is to make sure that if the Democrats do run the table in 2012, they do so with a mandate to enact the kind of reforms he advocated yesterday: Cutting the Pentagon budget, returning taxes on the wealthy to Clinton-era levels, building upon the health care reform law to lower health care costs, and protecting Medicare and Social Security for future generations. That is a winning platform at the polls and an effective roadmap for governance. Obama took the first step on that road yesterday.

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