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Through the Looking Glass

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 13, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Is it just me, or does watching a GOP presidential debate make you feel like the Mad Hatter is going to jump onto the stage at any moment?

There was the chilling moment when Wolf Blitzer posed a hypothetical to Ron Paul about the extent to which he would take his libertarian philosophy. Blitzer asked what should be done in the case of a 30-year old man who lacks health insurance and who, through some tragedy, finds himself in the hospital in a coma. Who pays for his coverage. Blitzer finished his query by asking, ?Are you saying society should just let him die?? Several people in the audience shouted out ?Yeah!? Last week, it was applause for the death penalty. Now, for letting someone die because they lack insurance. There is something very creepy going on here. To his credit, Congressman Paul did not join the death chant but insisted a hospital should treat the man, and that private charities would find ways to pay for the bill. That may be unrealistic, but at least it was not inhumane.

Gov. Rick Perry of Texas was the central focus of most of the other candidate?s attacks and he was not as quick on his feet tonight. He was understandably defensive about having called Social Security a ?ponzi scheme? ? although the line was a hit with a focus group of conservative Republican voters. But, you have the suspicion that if asked point blank, Gov. Perry could not explain what a ponzi scheme is. Or, how the Federal Reserve works. Or, what the 14th Amendment stipulates and what that means. &c. Last night, viewers could see with their eyes what Texan politicos have been whispering for a long time: The governor is not the brightest bulb in the room. It was stunning, was it not, to hear him suggest that Franklin Delano Roosevelt made a hash of things in the 1930s, a debate that I thought had finally been put to rest in 1964.

Still, what was more alarming than Perry?s less able defense was the nature of the attacks being launched upon him. Most were not, like the Social Security, raised by those concerned to make the GOP more moderate. Most of the attacks were from the right. The most heated discussion concerned Perry?s decision as governor to provide vaccines against cervical cancer for young girls. Michelle Bachmann pointed out that Perry?s former chief of staff had become a lobbyist for the pharmaceutical company that made the vaccine, which is certainly worthy of note. Perry said he was merely trying to save lives. In a normal world, that would be a pretty good line of argument, but a tea Party debate is not normal. ?To have innocent little 12-year-old girls be forced to have a government injection through an executive order is just flat out wrong. That should never be done. That's a violation of a liberty interest,? was Bachmann?s explanation for her opposition. Funny, I thought the innocent little 12-year old girls were injected with a vaccine not with government. Silly me. And woe betide the candidate who defends the government spending on medical research that makes such vaccines possible, or the public health agencies that distribute them. Nanny government.

The most dangerous part of the debate for the GOP, and one that will not go away any time soon, had to do with immigration. Here is an issue on which Perry?s relative moderation might stand the GOP in good stead in a general election: He opposes building a fence on the border and he signed into law Texas? version of the DREAM Act, offering in-state tuition to the children of undocumented workers. But, immigration is one of the issues upon which the GOP base has developed an orthodox position of intransigence. Sen. Rick Santorum, who

like Newt Gingrich, tends not to bash immigrants, nonetheless made a slip of the tongue that might be considered Freudian: ?Well, I mean, what Governor Perry?s done is he provided in-state tuition for ? for illegal immigrants. Maybe that was an attempt to attract the illegal vote ? I mean, the Latino voters.? Oops. Michelle Bachmann challenged Perry too, saying, ?And I think that the American way is not to give taxpayer subsidized benefits to people who have broken our laws or who are here in the United States illegally. That is not the American way. Because the immigration system in the United States worked very, very well up until the mid-1960s when liberal members of Congress changed the immigration laws.? One wishes Mr. Blitzer had asked her to give a brief summation of the history of America?s immigration laws. Did they, before the 1960s, really work so well? For example, when we refused to increase the quote for Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany, did that work well? Romney was just as bad, albeit offering his response in boilerplate language: ?With regards to illegal immigration, of course we build a fence and of course we do not give instate tuition credits to people who come here illegally. That only attracts people to come here and take advantage of America ?s great beneficence.? Look at an electoral map of the United States, my friends. See that big state in the South, Texas ? it is turning purple.

It is sad to see what is happening to today?s Republican Party. Our democracy needs two strong parties if it is to work properly. Where is the contemporary equivalent of William F. Buckley who said there was no room in the conservative movement for anti-Semites? Where is the contemporary equivalent of Ronald Reagan, who believed fiercely in smaller government but never let that belief keep him from cutting a deal with his political opponents? Where is the contemporary equivalent of George W. Bush who gave voice to a compassionate conservatism or to his father who spoke of a thousand points of light? Romney was the great hope of GOP moderates, but he is fast becoming just as rabid as the rest of the Tea Party crowd. It is craziness. The GOP is ruining its brand at a time when they should be thinking how they can defeat a president who is deeply wounded by the anemic economy. Instead they are dissing Latinos, denouncing vaccines, and cheering for death.

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