

Romney's Night

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 31, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

As the Republicans brought their convention to a close last night in Tampa, and I prepared for bed, I pulled out my legal pad to note one last, overall impression. I wrote the single word "underwhelmed" across the page.

It is a shame that most Americans will not have heard the best speech of the night. Grant Bennett, who succeeded Mitt Romney as a Mormon bishop in their Massachusetts congregation, told of the ten to twenty hours Romney dedicated to the work of pastoring his flock, the frequent phone calls to make sure an elderly member of the flock who was in hospital would get a visit, the significance of "self-reliance" in the Mormon pantheon of values (something I don't entirely understand), a quote from the Letter of James, not a big favorite with Protestants, about helping the widows and the lonely. Bennett was followed by a Mormon couple whom Romney had pastored when their son died of cancer at age 14, and another woman whose child was born with severe physical challenges and who spoke movingly about the care and concern Romney showed them. What came through this testimony, powerfully, was the essential decency of Mitt Romney. Of course, decent people can do indecent things, especially in the no-holds-barred campaigns of today, but it is good to know that the man who may be our next president has, at his core, a set of experiences that attune him to some of the tragedies of life and in which he rose to the challenge of ministering to those in need. Most of the networks did not carry these testimonies. Fox News did and, at their conclusion, Bill O'Reilly said, "Well that was nice but let's turn to the politics."

Then, just as the non-cable networks were tuning in, Clint Eastwood took the stage. I have long disliked the practice of politicians fawning over celebrities. I do not care what Eastwood or Barbra Streisand think on any issue. God protect the Republic from the day when a Kardashian will introduce a candidate! Eastwood was an especially odd choice for a GOP convention. The man who has fathered seven children by five different women was not there to lend his support to traditional marriage! But, his performance was bizarre in the extreme, unsettling really. Again, one had to ask about the basic competence of the Romney campaign team for allowing this to happen.

Senator Marco Rubio delivered a strong speech, no, better to say, he delivered a weak speech exceptionally well. I texted a friend, "Como se dice 'puff' en espanol?" Rubio laced his text with Tea Party ideas about American exceptionalism, calling the crowd "patriots" and indulging in the kind of fervid nationalistic language that can get scary. He said of President Obama's ideas about governance that these are the "ideas people come here to get away from. Ideas that make America more like the rest of the world instead of making the rest of the world more like America." I find this sort of jingoism very distasteful. Rubio's personal stories of his grandfather and father were powerful, more Horatio Alger stuff to be sure, but that does not make it any less evocative: Alger, remember, may have been working from a formula, but he wrote many novels using that formula.

Rubio also spoke powerfully about the centrality of faith to society. He invoked the national motto "In God We Trust" and he rightly claimed that religion can and should act as a check on human hubris. But, even here, he went too far, saying "we've always understood the scriptural admonition that 'for everyone to whom much is

given, from him much will be required.? We are a blessed people. And we have honored those blessings with the enduring example of an exceptional America.? Huh? I have never heard that particular verse of the Good Book used to justify American exceptionalism. And, I hope I never do again.

Then, Mr. Romney entered the arena. Instead of coming straight on stage, the convention planners had him walk down the aisle of the convention floor as Al Gore did in Los Angeles in 2000. But, Gore, who could be stiff also, was fired up and came down his aisle high-fiving people as he went. Poor Mitt Romney: Instead of looking awkward with one person, Rubio, on stage, he looked awkward with dozens of people as he shook hands. Again, the campaign staff seems not to think these things through.

Romney's speech was better written than delivered, as one would expect, but it was not particularly well written. It jumped around, one moment talking about his childhood, then his cabinet meetings as Governor of Massachusetts, then back to Michigan and starting out on his own. He had the story of his Dad fleeing Mexico, and "his family being fed by the U.S. government as war refugees" a line that seemed to directly contradict the dominant GOP motif that the "collective" or "big government" or "Washington" only really turned bad, and socialistic, and Marxist, when Barack Obama came to town. Romney made no attempt to reconcile the biographical fact with the ideological narrative. Similarly, he claimed that President Obama lacked the "basic qualification" for the presidency, a background in business, but did not explain why, then, Congressman Paul Ryan is such a stellar choice for the vice presidency seeing as Ryan, too, lacks business experience. (Incidentally, so did Ronald Reagan.) Romney spoke movingly about the centrality of "communities, family and faith" but did not reconcile these three with the Ayn Randian hyper-individualism that has dominated much of the rhetoric of this campaign and inspired his running mate into politics.

Romney repeated a now standard line from his stump speech: "In America we celebrate success, we don't apologize for success." This line always brings to my mind those horrible posters one sometimes sees in offices, featuring a view of the Grand Canyon, or an eagle soaring, and one word captions like "freedom" or "opportunity" or "success," then, in smaller print, a really smarmy quote or poem. I hate those posters. But, someone is buying them. My worry about Romney's line about success is that it might work. It certainly got a big round of applause from the assembled in Tampa. On the other hand, when Mr. Romney spoke about caring for the poor and the sick and helping those in need, that line was met with silence.

Undoubtedly one of the most well-received lines of the nights was this: "President Obama promised to slow the rise of the oceans and to heal the planet. My promise is to help you and your family." It is perfectly fine to poke fun at the grandiosity of Obama's 2008 campaign. But, it is not perfectly fine to dismiss the very real dangers posed by global climate change. In Florida, of all places. And global climate change is precisely the kind of issue that will require a strong governmental response and U.S. leadership on the world stage. If you seek that response, and those living in Tampa, and Miami, and other cities at sea level should demand such a response, and if you desire that kind of global leadership, Mr. Romney is not the person to look to. I would add that for millions of people around the world, global climate change is a life issue as well.

Listening to some of the commentary this morning, it is clear that many Republicans were deeply worried that the Romney campaign continually flubbed this week. A convention is a tightly scripted event. The organizers produced a video about the Romney family, and about Mitt Romney's life of service to others, a video so well done I got teary-eyed. But the organizers showed that video before the network coverage began and those who tuned in via ABC, CBS and NBC were not only denied the chance to see it, they were treated to Mr. Eastwood's bizarre performance. All week, speakers spoke more about themselves than about their nominee. And the nominee himself delivered a speech that only rated a 4 on the richter scale. I do not believe that running a great campaign necessarily indicates a candidate will be a great president. But, the obverse may be true: If you can't manage a campaign, how will you manage the White House?

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