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What the Dems Need to Say

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 4, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

As the Democrats gather in Charlotte, you would have thought that it might have occurred to them that they need a narrative to justify the case for re-election but, instead, they have seemed unable to even answer the simple question: Are you, and is America, better off than we were four years ago? David Plouffe couldn?t bring himself to say yes to this question. Finally, Vice President Biden said: ?Of course we are. Osama bin Laden is dead and General Motors is alive.? The narrative needs to be filled out, but there is the start of a narrative.

It has been one of the great political shockers that candidate Obama, so gifted at oratory, became mute in office, failing to find ways to explain his many and varied proposals, to explain the situation in which America found itself and what he intended to do to ameliorate the problems. A wonk by nature, he took what is a good insight ? good policy makes good politics ? and ran amok with that insight, forgetting that the rest of us don?t get policy briefings and that the results of some of his policies would not be felt favorably for years and Americans were hurting now. Perhaps, too, it is difficult to define and defend the historic vocation of the Democratic Party as the champion of working people when you have Tim Geithner standing next to you.

Nowhere was the inability to explain and sell a policy more evident than with the Affordable Care Act. Yes, Obama succeeded where others had failed before him and he gets credit for that. But, as soon as the ink was dry, he stopped selling the policy. Congressional Democrats mostly ran from their votes in favor of the ACA and got trounced at the midterms. Even today, why do we not know the name of a five year old who had a pre-existing condition, had been denied coverage by an insurance company, and who, today, because of the ACA has coverage? Why does this Act not have it version of Ryan White, a face that can humanize the enormously complicated issues? Why do White House spokespeople talk about the way the ACA did approve cuts in Medicare spending, but only for providers and not for beneficiaries without explaining the deal that was cut. Health care providers ? doctors and hospitals (it helps to spell that out) realized they would not longer have to cover the costs of treating those without insurance because now everyone will have insurance. In exchange, they agreed to reduce their Medicare reimbursements. Not one dime was cut from beneficiaries, that is, you, the people who rely on Medicare.

I worry that the Democrats have failed to grasp that they won Round 1 of the election in terms of strategy. The Republicans wanted this election to be a referendum on Obama, and the Democrats wanted it to be a choice election. Choosing Paul Ryan as his running mate amounted to the GOP?s white flag on the referendum election. That is why, last week in Tampa, Romney was not very harsh about the President, adopting the ?more in sadness than in anger? tone that was aimed squarely at undecided voters. Team Obama seems still to see this as a base-driven election, and viewing it as such helped turn it into a choice election, but the most recent CNN poll showed 11 percent of the electorate still undecided. Will the Democrats this week play to that 11 percent or are they still more interested in whipping up different interest groups with targeted policy solutions and no overall vision for the country? Make no mistake about it ? those undecided voters, whoever they are, they are not partisans, they are not especially concern about contraception mandates or gun rights or the deportation of undocumented workers or the gold standard. They are not very engaged in politics at all, certainly not very ideological, but they want the country to work better than it is and more of the country to be working.

I think the President has to confront the GOP charges head-on in crafting his narrative. He must say, ?They?re right. Last time I stood before this convention, I did set a goal of reducing the deficit by half. And, they are right also that this economic recovery is the most anemic since the Great Depression. But, they act as if nothing happened in the autumn of 2008 when what happened was the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. They ask if you are better off than you were four years ago. I hate to remind them, but when I took the oath of office, the nation was losing half a million jobs a month. Now we are gaining them, not fast enough to be sure, but we are gaining jobs. They say I have added to the deficit, and indeed we have. Because when I took office, the economy was in free fall and the first thing we had to do was stop the bleeding. That visit to the economic hospital took money. We had to bailout the auto industry, which we did. We had to cuts taxes on the middle class, which we did. We had to invest in shovel-ready jobs, which we did. Was it enough? I will remind you that not one Republican voted for the Recovery Act so if you think we did not do enough, don?t blame the Democrats!? I understand why, in early 2009, the President did not want to point out how bad the recession was. That would have only added to the fear. But, the fact is that the Recovery Act or the Stimulus was needed and it did stop the bleeding.

Today, we are not adding enough jobs, but at least we are adding jobs not losing them. Today, for the first time in history, projected health care costs will rise more slowly. Today, people can look at their 401k?s without fear. Today, we have the kinds of regulations that will prevent the financial meltdown that brought on the economic disaster in the first place. The Democrats are right to say that the GOP would simply bring us back to the policies that got us into this mess in the first place, but Obama must make the link to his own policies and how they have helped, not cured, but helped restore the economy and will continue to do so in the future. I think it is a pretty good story to tell and am unsure why they have not been telling it all along.

Obama must all acknowledge that he has not been able to help Washington break out of its partisan ways, that he has not united the country. He must acknowledge that. And, he can promise to keep trying. He cannot simply blame the Republicans, even though they deserve the blame, but his surrogates must ram this home. Never in my life time has more venom, more irrational hatred, been directed at a president, not even Nixon. Many Democrats said hateful things about George W. Bush but no Democrat in Congress shouted out ?You Lie? during a State of the Union speech. And, the President can remind voters that on November 6, they get to decide, not the Tea Party Caucus, whether they want Congress to work together with the President. I would even suggest that Obama say: ?I hope you will send more Democrats to Congress, but most of all, I hope you will reward those moderate members of Congress who are willing to work across the aisles whether they are Democrats or Republicans. It is not only the Republican Party that will be more impoverished next year because Dick Lugar will not be in the Senate. The country will be impoverished.?
Governor Romney?s speech also gave the President an opening he did not have this time last week. Mr. Romney did not mention the men and women in uniform who defend this country, nor those veterans who have already served. The omission was glaring in every way, but I think it shows the principal deficiency of Romney?s view of the presidency. In his speech he said Obama was unqualified for the office because he had no experience in business, but government is not a business. Government deals with things that do not easily fit into a spreadsheet: justice, war and peace, the common good. Yes, we can create metrics to measure the effectiveness of our policies, but there is not metric in the world to determine a policy?s moral worth as opposed to its efficacy. Obama must be careful here, of course, because no one should use the men and women of the armed forces as political pawns, but I really think Romney?s omission displayed something profoundly deficient about his understanding of the job he seeks.

I hope the President speaks to all Americans on Thursday night, not just to those who write checks to Emily?s List. I hope he will not engage the social issues in the crass way his campaign has so far. I hope he will speak to all of us and defend his record which is largely eminently defensible.

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