

The Dems' First Night

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 5, 2012 | Distinctly Catholic

The nation is engaged in a great debate about who can best be trusted to run the country for the next four years, President Obama or Governor Romney. But, comparing the first night of both conventions, there is no doubt which party runs a smoother convention: The Democrats.

Last week, at the GOP convention in Tampa, speaker after speaker mentioned their nominee in passing or as an after-thought. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the next generation of GOP leaders, who are rising in Tea Party Times, would celebrate the culture of "I've got mine!" but one had the suspicion in Tampa that the paramedics would need to be called in for all those strained shoulders and elbows resulting from so much patting of one's own back.

Last night, by contrast, every speaker tied in every other paragraph to either praise of Obama or criticism of Romney. Almost every speaker touched on the key phrases designed to appeal to different sections of the Democratic base: "a woman's right to choose," "the right to love whom you want," "more Pell grants." These repetitions had the effect of making the Democrats look like the party of culture wars, but they were targeted at, in order, suburban, independent swing voting women, affluent gay men and women, young people. Actually, all three lines were targeted at young people. Democrats talk about gay marriage the way Republicans talk about Israel. It is not so much the gay vote Democrats seek, they already have it. It is young people who want to feel that they are on the right side of history, indeed that they can be part of history. When Republicans talk about Israel, they are not really going after the Jewish vote, which they will lose. It is about evangelicals who are deeply committed to the state of Israel for biblical more than geo-strategic reasons.

Of course, the Democrats had some stumbles yesterday too. The fact that the Democratic platform does not mention the Godhead is not, in itself, a big deal. No one reads platforms anymore. But, the omission feeds a narrative that the Democrats are not very God-fearing. It is not the omission per se, but the fact that no one caught it that alarms people. In another instance, the Democrats finally put a human face on the Affordable Care Act, 2 year-old Zoe Lihn, who was born with a heart ailment and whose health care quickly approached the "lifetime limits" on the family's insurance policy, limits that have been eliminated by the ACA. Zoe's mother Stacey rebutted Romney's charge last week that people felt best about Obama on the day they voted for him, saying her best day was when she received the letter from her insurance company that the ACA had eliminated her health plan's limit. It was very effective. It was not in primetime. It should have been and every speaker at the convention should speak of little Zoe. On the other hand, at least the Democrats had the good sense not to feature the head of NARAL in primetime.

Julian Castro's keynote was, for me, the highlight of the night. He was passionate and articulate, his daughter adorable and show-stealing, his speech well crafted and delivered with panache. His story is compelling, a rags-to-service rather than rags-to-riches tale of tough Latina women working hard to make a better life for their children. He quoted Gov. Romney speaking to a group of college students and encouraging them to start a business. "Borrow money if you have to from your parents," Romney had said. Castro dead-panned, "Gee, why didn't I think of that!" It was hilarious, but it contained a dagger in the hilarity, confirming people's suspicion

that, as Castro said, "I don't think he [Romney] meant any harm. I think he's a good guy. He just has no idea how good he's had it."

Castro also listed a series of popular positions that Gov. Romney had opposed, concluding each cadence with the words "Gov. Romney said 'No,'" getting the whole audience to join him in the "No." When he got to universal health care, he stopped the cadence, said, "Actually?," and recalled Romney's prior support for health care reform in Massachusetts. The audience burst into laughter and applause. It was a deft way to call attention to Romney's most prominent flip-flop. Castro's star is sure to rise in the years ahead.

The introductory film for Michelle Obama cleverly invoked the 1%, but not in the way it was vilified by Occupy Wall Street. Here, the one percent were the military families whose heroic sacrifice keeps the other 99% of the nation safe. The film was followed by a real military Mom who spoke of her gratitude for all the First Lady and Dr. Biden have done for military families. This program – the film, the military Mom, the First Lady – was crafted before Mr. Romney failed to mention soldiers or veterans in his speech last week, and it was designed to remind voters that in addition to the economy, a President has other duties and that, for most Americans, President Obama has fulfilled those duties admirably.

The First Lady's speech was effective to be sure. I could have done without the claim that "he (the president) believes that women are more than capable of making our own choices about our bodies and our health care?" which prejudices the issue, because some of us Democrats do not think abortion is health care and think that more than "our bodies" are involved. But I understand why it was said and the centrality of the abortion rights issue to Democrats this year, even while I was struck by the fact that the whole import of her speech – that her husband's personal empathy is the foundation of his empathetic policies – evidently stops for Democrats at the birth canal. But, I said enough on that yesterday.

Michelle Obama delivered a most effective rebuttal of two Republican claims. At a time when the Romney campaign is running ads about welfare, her story of her father, working hard to support his family despite the onset of MS, gave the lie to the idea that the working poor are looking for handouts. And, I think she captured and challenged the sense of self-satisfaction that characterizes today's GOP when she said, "And he [the president] believes that when you've worked hard, and done well, and walked through that doorway of opportunity?you do not slam it shut behind you?you reach back, and you give other folks the same chances that helped you succeed."

Nowhere was the disconnect between the Horatio Alger stories of both parties more obvious than on the issue of immigration. Last week, most of the GOP immigrant stories were of a nineteenth or early twentieth century vintage, although Marco Rubio and Susanna Martinez brought the immigrant experience up to date. What neither Rubio or Martinez did, however, was speak to the need to keep that story going. They did not confront this desire of their party to close the door behind them. It was a lost opportunity, one that may well cost Romney the election as Latino swing voters in Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico, Florida and Virginia see that today's GOP has nothing to offer those members of their families who lack documentation.

So, first night comparisons go to the Dems. Their speakers were on message. They were not defensive about the president's record. They spoke to the future as well as the past. We learned a great deal less about Governor Chris Christie's goings-on in New Jersey last night than we did the week prior, but this morning, the newspapers will not be filled with recriminations. The message was delivered. Whether it gets through remains to be seen.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/28/2017 - 17:55): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/dems-first-night>