

Bill's Show in Charlotte

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 6, 2012 | Distinctly Catholic

Last night, the Democrats brought out the Big Dog from Arkansas to make their case, and, Lord, did he make it! No one has mastered the art of weaving together so much policy detail with so much folksiness in the history of modern campaign as Bill Clinton. And, I use the verb "mastered" advisedly. He did not always have that gift. Those who remember his rambling convention speech in 1988, or watched a still young Clinton on the stump in New Hampshire in 1992, will tell you that there was a time when he lacked this gift. He has it now. In abundance.

There were a couple of ironies in Clinton's nominating speech. Bill Clinton knows something about divisive political environments. How quickly we forget, watching him bask in the role of elder statesman, with approval ratings through the roof, that the Republicans impeached this man! Ironic, too, that the man who was responsible for creating the New Democrat brand was brought into to bolster a president widely perceived as more traditionally liberal.

Unlike virtually every speaker on Tuesday night, Clinton did not mention any culture war issues. He did not speak to a woman's supposed right-to-choose. He did not speak about same sex marriage. Instead there were the kind of policy specifics that were so obviously absent in Tampa last week, and a narrative about the past four years that rings true: "In Tampa, the Republican argument against the president's re-election was pretty simple: We left him a total mess, he hasn't finished cleaning it up yet, so fire him and put us back in." Poll after poll show that most voters still think President Bush and Wall Street were to blame for the economic mess, but if Obama points that out, it looks like he is evading responsibility. It took someone like Clinton, as Chris Cillizza pointed out in this morning's *Washington Post*, to both apologize for President Obama's inability to turn the economy around quickly, and to vouch for him nonetheless. "No president — not me, not any of my predecessors, no — could have fully repaired all the damage that he found in just four years," Clinton told the convention. And, again, "President Obama started with a much weaker economy than I did."

Perhaps the most counter-cultural statement by the former president was that "politics doesn't have to be a blood sport," and that it is a noble calling. In this Tea Party infused era, we have forgotten that government is an instrument of the national will. It is not the enemy. It is us. It is what we make of it. We can agree or disagree about how that instrument should be used. A smart conservative friend reminded me the other day that, human nature being what it is, once anyone, a corporation or an individual, gets a slice of the government pie, they never want to give it up. Fair enough. But, that does not make government the enemy. It doesn't even make government the other. This is also Catholic social teaching 101.

Clinton also took direct aim at two of the more truth-busting claims made by the Romney/Ryan campaign. He rebutted the idea that President Obama raided Medicare to pay for the Affordable Care Act. (I know, I know — even Democrats are now calling it Obamacare, and I even recommended they do so, but it will take me time.) And, as the man who signed health care reform in the face of stiff opposition from his own party's base, Clinton was uniquely able to rebut the falsehood regarding recent welfare reform waivers granted to states, which have become the target of a Romney campaign as. Clinton challenged voters to remember the truth as he told it every

time they see that ad. You can bet that Republicans will run some polls before keeping that ad on the airwaves.

The Republican Party has no one who can do what Bill Clinton did last night. They invoke the memory of Ronald Reagan, but he has gone to God and can not come out to deliver a speech. And, they have kept George W. Bush far from Tampa last week. Clinton is popular not only because of his folksy speaking style, but because people look back on the Clinton years as good times. I have my criticisms of some key policy decisions Clinton made, most especially consenting to a lower tax rate on capital gains than on ordinary income. But, last night, all was forgiven. He did what only he could do and he did it with vigor, humor and class. If Obama wins this thing, his first call of thanks has to go to Bill Clinton.

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