

Obama's Speech

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 7, 2012 | Distinctly Catholic

President Obama's acceptance speech was certainly better than Mitt Romney's last week, but that is a pretty low bar. It was not as good as Joe Biden's which preceded it last night. It was most definitely not as good as President Bill Clinton's the previous night. And, yet, it had all the hallmarks of a classic Obama speech: The uplifting oratory, the well-turned phrases, and the emphatic delivery. What was different was the circumstance. The magic is gone. It is 2012 not 2008. Americans were content with rhetoric four years ago but now they want results.

No Obama speech is bad, and the president's line about the GOP suggesting tax cuts could cure the common cold was very fine. The most obvious difference between Obama's speech and Romney's was the central place Obama — and indeed the entire Democratic convention — gave to the men and women of the armed forces and our nation's veterans. I wish Obama had drawn the inference I drew: I am sure Mr. Romney values the service of our soldiers and sailors, too, but when you think the principal qualification for the presidency is the ability to read a spreadsheet, you tend to miss the human element in governance and citizenship. Joe Biden made this point powerfully when discussing the auto bailout. Obama did not.

But this speech failed in other obvious ways. He spoke in passing about the Affordable Care Act and mentioned a two year old with a pre-existing condition, but he did not mention her name. Common. This is Politics 101. Her name is Zoe Lihn, and she was introduced to the convention Tuesday night. The Obama campaign's one word theme this year is "Forward" but their one word theme on health care should be "Zoe." I am getting tired of saying it: Until the average voter can put a face to the policy, the way Ryan White became the face of the battle against HIV/AIDS, the ACA will be a tough sell and it shouldn't be a tough sell. Here is an instance where the President has not only proposed specifics, they have been enacted. Here is an issue — controlling health care costs — without which we can't solve any other issue. In 2010, Democrats lost control of the House because they let the Republicans define the ACA. Obama's failure to define and defend his landmark accomplishment risks control of the White House. Forget the focus groups and the poll-tested answers. The president needs to defend his record.

The one part of the speech that I really liked was probably not the line that registered well with swing voters. Obama said, "We, the People, recognize that we have responsibilities as well as rights; that our destinies are bound together; that a freedom which asks only what's in it for me, a freedom without a commitment to others, a freedom without love or charity or duty or patriotism, is unworthy of our founding ideals, and those who died in their defense." Here was the response to the Ayn Rand-loving libertarians who were so prominent in Tampa. The most striking thing about the last two weeks was how much the two conventions had in common. Both parties said what is always said, but in this year is actually true: The choice in 2012 is between two starkly different alternatives. Mr. Romney's plans for the economy and the relationship between government and citizenry really would alter the social contract, from the proposal to voucherize Medicare to the promise of yet more tax cuts to the super-rich. Normally, this would not sell, but if Obama and the Democrats are only promising more of the same, it might.

All week the Democrats lambasted Romney and the Republicans for promising tough choices but failing to articulate what those choices are. Most Americans do not know the details of the Ryan budget plan which has become, de facto, the GOP platform, but it is not short on specifics. What was especially strange was that President Obama, who also leveled the charge of a lack of specifics, then gave a speech that did not have much in the way of specifics. That was bizarre.

Both parties drew lines in the sand. Both parties tried to accentuate the differences between the two parties. But, the best speech of the two weeks was given by President Clinton whose career, and whose speech, was premised on his own ability to speak past the partisan divisions, even while he faced enormous, unrelenting partisan attacks. Obama should consider firing David Axelrod and hiring Clinton as his chief strategist.

How will it play out? There was plenty in both conventions to rally the base and that is part of what a convention is for. Marginally, I think the GOP did a better job reaching out to swing voters than the Democrats, in part because so many of the Democratic speakers, with the notable exception of Clinton, focused on culture war issues like abortion and contraception. (Clinton also gets high marks for mentioning poverty and the poor more than any of the other headliners.) On the other hand, President Obama is still the more gifted politician than Governor Romney. Even though I was underwhelmed by Obama's speech, it was better than Romney's. So, of the conventions were something of a wash, the victory goes to the Dems, who entered these two weeks with slight leads in most of the swing states. All could be undone for Obama depending on today's unemployment numbers ? and the two reports that will come out before the election. This year, as I said, a good speech will not be enough. The American people will want some confirmation that the country really is moving in the right direction, that the economy really is improving, that the Democrats have results as well as rhetoric to offer.

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