

Does Romney Think Before Speaking?

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 13, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

If this goes on much longer, I am going to start feeling sorry for Mitt Romney.

Romney's campaign issued a blistering attack on President Obama for responding to the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Egypt and Libya by condemning the internet video that mocked the Prophet. It's disgraceful that the Obama administration's first response was not to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks, said a statement released by the Romney campaign. The statement was embargoed until midnight, to keep the campaign's already stated commitment not to go negative on 9/11.

The problems with the statement were several. First, the response to which the Romney campaign objected was not a response at all, and had been issued before the attacks on the embassies. Second, the statement came not from the Obama administration but from embassy officials in Cairo who were trying to defuse the mob that had gathered in front of their gates. Third, while we all enjoy, and none more than journalists, the rights accorded us by the First Amendment, depredations of others' religions may be protected but it is hardly commendable. Would Mr. Romney condemn a statement objecting to a similarly disrespectful treatment of Jesus of Nazareth?

Of course, by morning the nation learned the grim news that the embassy attack in Libya had killed four Americans including our nation's ambassador. Here was a chance for Romney to: a) correct or cover-up the mistakes in the initial statement; and b) back away from the whole episode by rightly noting that the death of a fellow American, killed in service to his nation, should not be the subject of a partisan campaign attack. Those who work on campaigns tend to reduce all reality to their own prospects and polls, but the attack in Libya was not launched with press releases and tweets. Lives had been lost. Decency alone counseled backing off the reckless charges of the prior night's statement. Mr. Romney even had an obvious out: I do not hold the President responsible for a statement from the embassy in Cairo anymore than I hold myself accountable for a press release from my campaign staffers.

Instead, Romney doubled down in a nationally televised press conference late yesterday morning, trying to make political hay out of a tragedy. It was unseemly. Also, stupid. Unsurprisingly, GOP leaders began distancing themselves from Mr. Romney's statements. Donald Rumsfeld came to his defense but that is a bit like receiving a compliment on one's pork pies from a vegetarian.

There is much to fear about a Romney presidency, from turning Medicare from a guaranteed benefit program into a premium support plan, and cutting Medicaid, and more tax cuts for the super-rich. But, the biggest thing to fear might be a Romney foreign policy. Candidate Romney criticizes President Obama for leading from behind in the Mideast, but then offers precious few details about how he would treat Iran, or the Arab Spring, differently. Oh, yes, he and Bibi Netanyahu are good buddies and the President has a prickly relationship with Israel's prickly Prime Minister, but Israel is more than Bibi Netanyahu. One has the suspicion that Romney's foreign policy team would like to send in the Marines to deal with any and all crises, but they can't really say that out loud. And, short of sending in troops, what precisely would Mr. Romney do differently from Mr.

Obama? Well, like closing tax loopholes, we are told to wait and see. If you find the comments of candidate Romney worrisome, you might find the prospect of a President Romney confirming your fears.

Romney is coming to look like someone who will say anything at anytime if he thinks it will help him win the election. Of course, all politicians do this: President Obama's decision on the HHS mandate surely was influenced by his need to garner contributions of pro-choice groups. But, at least Obama made a case for his decision, not a very good one, on policy grounds. Romney simply asserts. After months and months of arguing that government does not create jobs, the private sector creates jobs, now his stump speech warns that the defense cuts his own running mate voted for will cause job losses and must be opposed on those grounds. Huh? After picking a running mate who really does want to change the very nature of Medicare, he attacks President Obama for cutting Medicare, even though the providers agreed to the cuts as part of the health care negotiations. Romney promises to keep the insurance companies from denying coverage because of pre-existing conditions, but does not explain how he can do that without the mandate the insurance companies demanded in exchange. Now, he condemns the White House for responding badly to a nasty event, even though it was not the White House and it was not a response. We were worried that Romney was another Thomas Dewey, someone incapable of connecting with the American people. He is turning into Sarah Palin, someone whose ambition has outrun his talents.

The election is still a long ways off, and Mr. Romney has a ton of money in the bank. He could turn this around. But, he needs to stop making self-inflicted gaffes. He needs to create a narrative for his campaign and stick to it. In the primaries, facing the likes of Newt Gingrich, Herman Cain and Rick Santorum, it might have been enough to dump millions of dollars in negative ads to garner 40% of the vote. But, in November, he will need 50% and he is facing an incumbent who is less susceptible to negative ads and who brings more in the way of political acumen to the encounter than Gingrich, Cain and Santorum put together. Most of all, Romney needs to find a way to make sure his campaign stops looking like the gang that couldn't shoot straight.

Note to Readers: I am heading over the Georgetown's Conference on Domestic Religious Liberty issues this morning, so I shall not be putting up any further posts today.

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