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Perry vs. O'Malley: From Crossfire to 2016?

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Distinctly Catholic

Last night, the CNN show "Crossfire," back after many years, featured a debate between Texas Governor Rick Perry and Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley. My first thought was that this was not a fair fight: O'Malley was trained by the Jesuits, among other things!

Gov. Perry is most known on the national stage for his disaster of a presidential campaign in 2012. He entered the race as the savior of the party, shot to the top of the primary polls, and then self-destructed, most famously when he could not recall in a debate the third department of the federal government he had pledged himself to eliminating. His "oops," was the single most memorable word from the entire series of debates. Last night, with his new glasses, Perry almost looked studious, and he was far more lucid than he had been during his campaign. Still, all he provided were slogans.

But, by the time Perry had his smash-up on stage, he was already slipping in the polls. Why? Because in a prior debate, he had dared to suggest that Americans embrace the DREAMers, those young immigrants who had been brought to this country as children without documents. He said that those who did not look on their plight lacked a heart. He was right, of course, but this failed the "no amnesty" orthodoxy of the GOP. My Catholic friends, especially our friends who work at the bishops' conference, should remember that moment and think twice about cozying up to today's Republican Party. The expression of empathy for the less privileged, which is at the heart of the Gospel, is currently a deal-breaker with a GOP primary electorate.

A previously poor campaign is not *prima facie* lethal to a subsequent bid for the White House. Reagan only secured his party's nomination on the third try, for example, and John McCain won his party's nod in 2008 after losing in 2000. The real problem for Perry is that he has not been a great governor. Among

the fifty states, Texas ranks 49th in high school graduation rates. It is dead last in the number of citizens that lack basic health insurance. Yes, Texas has seen many new jobs created on Perry's watch, but they are mostly low wage jobs. And, the statistics for the state would be even worse if large population centers like Houston and San Antonio were not led by progressive mayors who are making investments in their cities' future.

Indeed, Texas' schools would be in far worse shape than they are, were it not for one of the most 'socialistic' experiments in public policy the nation has ever known. More than 150 years ago, the Texas Permanent School Fund was established with an initial investment of \$2 million in state money. In 1876, half of the land in the public domain was given to the fund and, in 1953, as the federal government relinquished off-shore coastal lands to the states, the revenue from these properties were added to the fund too. In the past few years, the revenues from this fund have awarded a staggering \$1 billion to Texas school districts. The fund also guarantees municipal bonds for education projects, lowering interest costs. But, don't expect Perry to be touting this given the fact that it runs entirely counter to his 'government is bad' philosophy.

Perry has a certain charisma. He has some of 'it,' that unquantifiable personal quality that allows a candidate to connect with viewers through the impersonal medium of a television camera. Sarah Palin has 'it,' as does Bill Clinton. Al Gore utterly lacked it. There is, when you think about it, something a little creepy about being able to caress an inanimate object like a television camera lens, but it seems to be a benefit in campaigning.

Gov. O'Malley could not be more different from Perry, both in his governing achievements and in his intellectual prowess. Full disclosure: O'Malley and I both went to Catholic University - he was one year behind me - and when he ran for governor of Maryland the first time, I helped cobble together a fundraiser for him. Occasionally, I would meet with his communications team to discuss messaging. That was before I was a journalist and could do things like that. I was elated when he won and, as a resident of Maryland, have been well pleased with his performance.

Before his election as governor, I drove up to Baltimore to watch O'Malley preside over a CitiStat meeting. As mayor of that great city, he had introduced his CitiStat program which required the heads of the different city agencies to identify quantifiable goals, a method for measuring success or failure at achieving those goals, and a monthly grilling from the mayor about how much progress had, or had not, been attained. I was deeply skeptical, believing then as I do know, that the most important things in life cannot be easily quantifiable. But, watching the meeting, I realized that something else was being achieved. The heads of the police department and the fire department and the human services department were all being held accountable and they were focused on their tasks in a way that they had not been before O'Malley introduced the CitiStat program. Focus is key, and it does not really matter how one achieves it. At the restaurant I ran, the waiters used to place a fruit garnish on the plates at brunch. Of course, the cooks could have done this just as easily, but by requiring the waiters to place the fruit on the plate, they had to look at the plate. Was this the omelet they ordered? Did that customer ask for scrambled or poached eggs on their corned beef hash? Did they ask for their eggs dry or runny and are these eggs cooked to order? CitiStat may or may not have been an accurate measure of all the varied tasks a government manager faces, but it achieved a new degree of focus. That focus is what really gets government, or waiters, doing a better job.

Soon after he was elected, O'Malley raised taxes on rich people. Maryland had a highly regressive income tax structure, with only two rates. He introduced a third that applied only to those making more than a quarter of a million a year. This is why I vote for Democrats, to raise taxes on rich people and invest that money into public schools, mass transit, etc. This is what O'Malley has done and it is why

Maryland is flourishing, topping many indices of social health, most especially the top-ranked public schools in the nation every year since 2007 and also topping the chart for median income. These are not small achievements for a governor.

O'Malley is a good candidate but he will need to calibrate his public demeanor. He is a deeply passionate person, but when the camera turns on, he is cool as a cucumber. That coolness, a certain imperturbability, will make a nice contrast with Hillary Clinton should they both decide to run. As my housemate said the other day when asked about the prospects of a Clinton candidacy: "Well, there will be plenty of drama because that is where they live." But, O'Malley also needs to differentiate himself from Obama, who at times seems positively bloodless. It is okay to show some passion, as well as some statistics, when speaking about the working poor and the day-to-day challenges they face.

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I do not know if in 2016 the race for the White House will come down to these two men. I do know that while it might or might not be a fair fight, it would be a good fight, as both men epitomize the essential differences between the parties and have demonstrable records on which to run. After eight years of Obama, we will want more than fine words. After 20 years of Bush, then Clinton, then Bush, it is time for some new faces. In the end, I think O'Malley would have the better of the argument, to be sure, but the nation could do worse than to find these two men at the top of their respective parties' tickets in 2016.

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