

Obama's Off-Target Speech

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 16, 2010 NCR Today

It is a sign of the gravity of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and of Washington's better-late-than-never awareness of that gravity that President Obama gave his first speech from the Oval Office to address the crisis. As always, the President spoke with great eloquence. His appeal to faith and resilience as essential components of the national character was Reaganesque, although it is telling that the rite of the Blessing of the Fleet, to which the President referred, is unique to those parts of America with Catholic roots. The Calvinists who had fleets in colonial New England did not bless their fleets. There is an interesting and very deep difference in viewing the relationship of faith to culture to which this cultural fact attests. If I could have a couple of hours with Obama and had Msgr. Albacete with me, we could make him a Catholic by showing why the blessing of the fleet that so moved him is even more profound than he realizes! But that is for another day.

What was most striking about the speech was what was not there. There was no How, or at least not enough of it. For example, Obama named two new officials, one to head the Restoration of the Gulf effort and another to overhaul the Minerals Management Service, but he did not say, as he might have said: "Each morning, these two men will report to me right after I receive my briefing from our national security staff." The President described the situation in the Gulf as a battle, than he should show some of his generalship.

I know that the most frustrating fact for the President, and for the American people, is that the only people who own the technology to get down a mile beneath the ocean and fix the leak are the very same people who got us into this mess. Yes, in the long run we need to end our addiction to oil, but what about now? I have written before that the President should create the equivalent of a fire brigade, under the auspices and authority of the Coast Guard, with equipment supplied by the oil companies. When a leak occurs, the government should respond. Does anyone else worry that BP's computer driven mechanical arms and submarines, while ostensibly trying to shut down the leak, might be destroying, wittingly or not, key evidence about the source of the initial problem? More importantly, it is our shores that are threatened, and our government's responsibility to protect them. Drilling should commence anew when the Secretary of Energy and the Commandant of the Coast Guard instruct the President that it can be done safely and that the newly formed brigade to deal with any system failures is in place. We should never again have to wait for an oil company to bring equipment from the North Sea.

In describing the need to move to a future in which we are no longer reliant on fossil fuels, the President was understandably vague. Who knows for sure what technology will actually be developed to break our dependence on oil? Still, he could have pointed out that other countries are creating new jobs by pursuing new energy technologies. He could have announced a series of new wind farms on federal lands. He could have announced that he was asking Congress to grant him emergency authority to over-ride bureaucratic and legal obstacles in the recovery effort in the Gulf, to expedite programs like building barrier islands. We needed to hear something concrete, not just something inspirational. The President compared the effort to pass new energy and climate change legislation to the effort to build munitions in World War II and the effort to land a man on the Moon in the 1960s. But those were concrete goals, with clear objectives, and the energy legislation pending in the Senate is far less obvious.

In short, President Obama did not identify, massage and direct the sense of helplessness most Americans feel right now. In his effort to appear in control, the President struck a false note that framed the whole speech: How can you pretend to be in control when, at the bottom of our television screens, while the analysts are dissecting your speech, we still see the endless video stream of the oil gushing from the ocean floor?

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