

On Immigration, Obama Needs His Moral Voice

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 1, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This morning, President Obama will give a major speech on immigration reform. Most political analysts are surprised that the White House is willing to pursue the issue, seeing as Congress has not yet quite finished financial reform, climate change legislation is riding rough waters, and any time the White House is not focused on the economy, people ask why. On top of that, there is the march of time and the onslaught of unanticipated crises. From the Gulf of Mexico to the mountains of Afghanistan, these crises continue to bedevil a White House that is at once capable of historic achievement like health care reform and yet also, simultaneously, gives off an air of being not quite ready for prime time.

So, it is important that the President hit the immigration ball squarely if he intends to hit it out of the park. This presumes that there is even a possibility of hitting a home run. Given the noisy nativism that dominates the Tea Party crowd and which has swept the legislature and people of Arizona into unconstitutional craziness, some suggest that the immigration issue is too toxic to touch, that it will backfire on the President. Some in Congress complain that they have had enough tough votes this year, as if voting is such an arduous activity. Some think that the unemployment rate is too high to consider a proposal that will, of necessity, regularize the status of millions more workers. All of these factors have some truth to them, and the President and his staff must consider them if he hopes to overcome them and the inertia they represent.

Most importantly, the President in his speech this morning needs to do what he did so well in the campaign: articulate a compelling narrative that explains why change is necessary. The only way to win on immigration is to give the most explicitly moral speech of his presidency. The President is a wonk, and he likes to consider rational arguments, look at data, debate policy details, all of which is good and commendable, but none of which will necessarily help him on this issue. Because, ultimately, the reason to do immigration reform is a simple one: It is the right thing to do.

Night before last, Paul Begala said on CNN that the politics of immigration reform were more complicated than some people think. He noted that the issue divides the GOP: The Business community wants immigration reform because it wants a cheap labor source while the Tea Party element of the GOP is vociferously anti-immigrant. (Begala was being kind: The Tea Party wing of the GOP is not just anti-immigrant, they are racists.) This is true enough, but it does Obama no good because there is no way to enlist the business community's rationale into a compelling narrative. Obama can't very well say, "Let's pass immigration reform so we can keep exploiting a cheap labor source!"

Now, Begala knows way more about politics than I do, but I think he missed the more significant divide within the GOP. The section of the GOP base most likely to embrace immigration reform is the Christian right. Latinos make up a significant part of the growth of the evangelical churches: The pastors of those churches are fighting consequently for an increasing number of their own people. Beyond the demographics, our current immigration laws are not just un-American, they are unchristian. They separate children from their parents, and husbands from their wives. Apart from the proof-texts from Exodus about treating the alien well, the Christian right has defined its political involvement as "pro-family" since Jerry Falwell organized the Moral Majority in 1979. "Pro-

family? and ?pro-life? were the two most frequently used adjectives in Moral Majority fund-raising letters and they remain staples of evangelical sermons and political discourse.

The key part of the narrative on immigration reform is that human rights and the claims of family should transcend DC?s toxic partisanship, which is why the Catholic Church has been at the forefront of the pro-immigrant movement. As [I suggested a few weeks back](#) [1]Mr. Obama could further make the point that the issue transcends, and should transcend, standard partisanship by sending to Capitol Hill the exact same proposal President Bush sent a few years ago.

The narrative on immigration also can tap into some of the most obvious, and emotionally powerful, aspects of the American story. Just yesterday, my colleague John Allen had an [interview with Archbishop Wenski](#) [2]of Miami who said, ?I think some of the anti-immigrant feeling that we?re experiencing in this country is just a revival of the Know-Nothing movement of the past, which sometimes was a veiled anti-Catholicism. That makes me even more upset where I hear Catholics spouting anti-immigrant things, because they?ve forgotten their history, and it?s a history that?s maybe only one generation removed from where they are today.? One of the things candidate Obama did so well as embody, in his own personal story, America?s capacity for change and social improvement. The President and Archbishop Wenski are both sons of immigrant fathers, but the president needs to sound more like the prelate if he is going to convince enough of his fellow Americans that this is the right thing to do.

Already, the President?s staff missed an opportunity, scheduling the speech at a local DC university. It should be delivered at Ellis Island. Or, even better, from the steps of St. Brigid?s Church in Pottsville, Iowa, a community that was deeply disrupted by an immigration raid several years ago. Or, in Gettysburg, in front of the monument to the fallen heroes of the ?Fighting Irish? brigade. Or, in Charlestown, Massachusetts, where nativists burned a convent in 1834. The point is that the President needs to find his moral voice, craft a narrative that places the issue of immigration reform squarely within that narrative of America?s continual quest for justice, and speak to the urgent needs of families torn apart by arbitrary immigration laws and enforcement policies. We voted for change, and this is a change we need. All we need is the convincing.

Tomorrow: More on the Politics of Immigration Reform

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