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Q & A: Steve Schneck on Palin-palooza

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

This week, we are asking prominent scholars about the prospect of a presidential campaign by Sarah Palin. Today, we hear from Professor Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America.

Steve Schneck:

Sarah Palin, as she herself insists, wants to take the GOP in a new direction. Her vision for the party has three distinctive components. First, it's populist. That is, it looks to capitalize on recession-driven, middle class resentment. Angry about imagined handouts to the poor and illegal, on one hand, and coddling of Wall Street, on the other hand, the shrinking middle class boiled over this election year and looks to be a continuing force for political change in 2012. Accordingly, Palin's language is filled with symbolic references to touchstones of populist sensibilities.

Secondly, her policy arguments are increasingly libertarian. She indicts the state for its perceived replacement of individual liberty with government benevolence. Her language here is chock-a-block with imagery of frontier self-reliance, suspicion of institutional authority, and privatization. Government and similar authorities are, in this view, ever a danger to be minimized and localized, with no appropriate role in using its "nanny-like" authority to impose values or expertise on citizens. Good order, in this aspect of Palin's vision, comes automatically from individuals in the free and competitive exercise of their rights—not from institutional authority.

Finally, Palin's vision for the GOP also resurrects Bush-era millennialism, hinting at apocalyptic last days, stressing American exceptionalism, and portraying the party and its policies in morally-weighted, religious language the provenance of which is Christian fundamentalism.

Palin is already fine-tuning her mix of these components for a bid for the party's presidential nomination.

And, it's a great mix for appealing to the GOP base, which has been transformed by the activism of the Tea Party and the swelling importance of similarly-minded conservative celebrities like Glenn Beck. Where tensions will emerge, I'd predict, will be with the GOP leadership on Capitol Hill which looks to have some prominence as the 'official' face of the GOP in the next few year's tete-a-tetes with the Obama administration. Such tensions, though, can only help Palin with the activist GOP base. I think she has a very good chance of winning the GOP nomination for 2012. Her chances for winning the general election would hinge, in my estimation, on her ability to distance herself from her own millennial and libertarian messages after securing the nomination. The populist card is her strongest in appealing to swing voters. The importance of that card, too, will depend on that election year's economic realities.

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